

Humor Me to Heaven:
Humor's Redemptive Role in the Works of Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Marilynne
Robinson

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Making Sense of Humor.....	4
Chapter Two: Weltyan Wit: Myth, Mississippi, and Mystery.....	24
Chapter Three: The Humorous Human Experience: The Redeeming Power of O’Connor’s Unapologetic Comedy.....	43
Chapter Four: Finding Mystery in the Mundane: Robinson’s Reconciliation of Humor and Religion Through Sacrament.....	59
Conclusion: Humoring Toward Heaven.....	74
Works Cited.....	77

Introduction

Making Sense of Humor

“An unfunny thing about humor is that you can’t think about it very long without becoming serious. And maybe you can’t be ponderous about human affairs very long without getting the giggles. If these seem inconsistent, it is only because the sober and the silly sides of our human struggle for survival and for perfection lie so close together.”
–Walt Disney

Many say that laughter is good for the soul. If laughter is good for the soul, humor, the wellspring of laughter, must be the source of goodness. However, before determining whether humor is good, one must answer the question: what is humor? Such a simple question poses a very intricate web of potential or semi-conclusive answers. The issue of humor has been a subject of discussion among philosophers since the days of Plato and Aristotle, and two thousand years later scholars in various disciplines are still analyzing the subject.

Perhaps the bewilderment surrounding the phenomenon of humor proceeds from its capacity to extend into many aspects of the human experience—the physical, psychological, emotional, cultural, and even spiritual. While humor is a type of stimulus that produces the physical effect of laughter, it is also relative to human social behaviors and personal beliefs, but most scholars neglect humor’s power to shed light on deeper epistemological issues, and its ability to act as a mediator between the temporal and spiritual realms. However, despite humor’s multifaceted capacity to reach different areas of the individual, the quality of humor that remains constant is its connection to human experience. Humor triggers a delightful reaction from qualities that are only held by the human soul, such as intellect and emotion; therefore, humor always functions within a context closely connected to the very essence of humanity. Though humorous occurrences render themselves in a variety of ways, the funniness of a situation always depends on the context of cultural norms and the reception of human characteristics.

Though circumstantial contexts of humor may be as dissimilar as a childish knock-knock joke, a politician's speech blunder, or even the sight of an oversized feline, the human capability to experience delight through recognizing contextual incongruities makes them humorous. John Morreall explains the Incongruity Theory¹ of humor in which delight occurs in the form of amusement, which is "intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate in some other way" (*Taking Laughter Seriously* 15). These unexpected disruptions in cultural norms often create a humorous experience that yields amusement and delight.

The sense of delight people experience through humor associates it with aesthetics. Just as a good painting or a well-written novel can produce a pleasurable effect on an individual, so a well-phrased, witty joke also produces a sense of delight. Because of humor's ability to produce delight, Morreall defines humor as a "kind of aesthetic experience" ("Humor As an Aesthetic Education" 57). Most people with an appreciation for the arts—whether dance, music, literature, or paintings—would agree that a good, aesthetically pleasing piece produces a powerful influence over both the senses and the soul. Elaine Scarry discusses how aesthetics cultivates a human desire to apprehend the depths of issues such as identity and purpose, saying beauty "prompts a search for a precedent . . . until it at last reaches something that has no precedent which may very well be the immortal" (30). So the effect of good art does not stop at mere appeal; a truly aesthetic experience opens the door to experiences more enriching than mere delight. Therefore, according to Morreall's definition, humor is an aesthetic experience that is capable of producing the same powerful effects as other forms of beautiful art.

While humor exists in many forms, the fictional works of Flannery O'Connor, Eudora

¹ Morreall credits Aristotle as the first to recognize the amusement associated with disconnects in cultural expectations in *Rhetoric*, though Kant and Schopenhauer are the primary scholars that delve further into the conditions of the Incongruity Theory, distinguishing it from other theories because of its involvement of the "absurd" (16).

Welty, and Marilynne Robinson provide a literary form of humor that is necessary in conveying the key theme of redemption in their works. Good art moves its audience to a delightful experience, and that experience results from gaining new perspective or renewed enlightenment of some truth inspired by the artwork. Humor acts in the same way; it literally “re-deems” in the sense that it causes one to perceive or judge (“deem”) an object or situation in a new light².

Morreall agrees by saying that “one of the most common ways of praising someone’s work is to say that he or she ‘saw things in a new way’” (59). This “re-seeing” implies the person’s re-judgment of some object, person, or idea that he now sees differently after the aesthetic experience occurs. Good art results in the viewer “re-deeming” some previous notion because of the work, and he gains a truer perspective than he had before. The object of redemption in this sense may range from convicting truths to palm trees. Scarry conveys her redemptive experience when she explains how her previous disdain towards the aesthetic appeal of palm trees was suddenly transformed during a particular aesthetic experience: “Suddenly I am on a balcony and its huge swaying leaves are before me at eye level, arcing, arching, waving . . . [the palm tree] throwing sunlight up over itself and catching it on the other side . . . It is everything I have always loved, fernlike, featherlike, fanlike, --lustrously in love with air and light (16). Scarry’s aesthetic experience in this one particular moment provided her with a new perspective that completely transformed her previous belief about the beauty of palm trees. And though Scarry’s redemptive only changed something as specific as her view of palm trees and their beauty, her example reveals the power within an aesthetic experience to unveil a truth that was previously

² According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *deem* means “to give or pronounce judgment; to act as judge, sit in judgment; to give one’s decision, sentence, or opinion; to arbitrate” (def. 1). Taking this definition into consideration and applying the prefix *re-*, which means “‘Again’, ‘anew’, originally in cases implying restoration to a previous state or condition” (def. iii), I am referring to the term *redeem* as a re-judgment or re-visioning of a situation or object through the lens of humor.

unseen. In this sense, humor is also an aesthetic experience that redeems truths about life and human nature; therefore, not only can humor be good for the human soul, but it can be an active and necessary factor in the soul's redemption.

The implications of redemption in humor are based on the fact that humor relies on context. In their analysis of humor, Hugh LaFollette and Niall Shanks claim that nothing in itself is humorous—people are able to sense humor only by relating the given objects or ideas within some type of context³ (332). For example, the sight of an obese cat is humorous only because people understand cats' stereotypical independent and self-pleasing attitudes and perhaps find the cat's ennui regarding his portly state fairly humorous. On the other hand, an excessively large elephant simply is not humorous. Nothing incongruous exists within his state, so the context, in this instance, leaves no room for delight.

Welty, O'Connor, and Robinson provide concrete examples of how the aesthetic of humor works in specific cultural contexts. The humor in their fiction works against the American stereotypes of success, wealth, and religion, providing a way for readers to relate to each author's particular use of humor. In his study of American humor, Arthur Power Dudden provides a historical background of the nation's use of humor from its very beginnings. Early American humor, described as "alienated and self-detached," is characterized by "the skeptical, the sardonic, the mocking, even the deliberately cruel" (9). These characteristics of American humor have survived throughout the centuries and are especially apparent in the works of Welty and O'Connor. However, Dudden also highlights points of debate that exist concerning the types and tones of humor. Malcolm Muggeridge contends, "[H]umor must be occasionally offensive or insulting in order to emphasize the grotesque disparity between intention and performance" (qtd.

³ Note the reason why outsiders so loathe the "inside joke;" only those within a very narrow context get to delight in the experience.

in Dudden 11). This view of humor represents the style for which O'Connor is most infamous, with her shocking themes that often highlight the spiritual hypocrisy of the "Christ-haunted South." However, others argue against this harsh humor, claiming America "prefer[s] the gentle to the sharp" (Thurber qtd. in Dudden 11). Robinson clings to this latter view since her humor and tone are much more subdued than O'Connor and Welty's. But despite their various tastes in humor, each author uses her own voice, style, and craft to incorporate humor into her literature. By using their humor within their own regional and moral contexts, Welty, O'Connor, and Robinson heighten the aesthetic of their literature and convey clearly humor's redeeming message in their fiction.

Understanding that humor is observed only through contextual relationships is a key factor in fully partaking in its aesthetic experience because context not only deals with relationships between objects and their contexts, but also the relationship between the self and one's context. Morreall explains that dissociating or distancing oneself in a humorous experience is similar to distancing oneself in order to appreciate a work of art:

We are all familiar with the notion that to appreciate something aesthetically, our attitude must be disinterested. We must be sufficiently "distant" from the aesthetic object so that it is not part of our practical life where we think about what we can do with objects, how much they cost, and so forth. Perhaps we are less aware that laughing at something requires that same kind of distance. When we feel that we are in actual danger, for example, we are unlikely to find the situation humorous . . . Later of course, we can step back to look at what happened more as an observer, and then perhaps we will laugh. (60)

This characteristic of distancing is a quality of the aesthetic experience of humor and is central to

humor's role in redemption. For instance, even a terrifying experience can be redeemed as a funny experience, but only after an individual has distanced himself from it. O'Connor infers this idea of distance her explanation of art in relation to the artist: "No art is sunk in the self. Rather in the art, the self becomes self-forgetful in order to meet the demands of the things seen" (*Mystery and Manners* 82). In the aesthetic experience of humor, "the thing seen" is the object re-perceived or re-contextualized to produce the humorous effect. In relation to Morreall's example, the "art" in O'Connor's statement is represented by the delight humor produces; therefore, the individual who has endured the terrifying experience must gain a distanced perspective of self in order to "meet the demands of" or appreciate the delight humor has to offer for the previously terrifying experience. But while Morreall's example deals with a threatening experience later redeemed through laughter, this idea of distancing is also necessary in providing opportunities of self-awareness. Humor exposes a person's own flaws, but only after he or she sees those flaws from a distance; therefore, humor works because distancing gives clear perspective and allows mankind to realize the truth about his nature.

Though nothing is intrinsically humorous, humor is intrinsically human. Humor is integral to being human because it involves many facets of the human experience. Morreall validates the value of humor through its ability to implement the following attributes that enrich the aesthetic experience of humanity itself: creativity, humility, truthfulness, and liberation ("Humor As an Aesthetic Education"). Consequently, Welty, O'Connor, and Robinson use these themes to enhance the aesthetic quality of their literary humor and to demonstrate that these attributes reveal not only that humor is redemptive in its creation of new perspectives, but also that these attributes are necessary for the deeper, spiritual redemption of the human soul.

People are able to enjoy humor because it exhibits the human quality of creativity. One of

Aristotle's arguments for the goodness of poetry is mimesis, the creative reproduction of something worth reproducing. Scarry says that "the act of replication" is almost an involuntary effect at the sight of something beautiful (3), and in replication, an individual's creativity is always present. In this case, the delightful act of mimesis reveals the connection between art and humor. A child's ability to mimic or recreate alternate versions of practical reality is an early sign of the creativity involved in humor. Morreall exemplifies this creative aspect by describing a child pretending to be a dog: "Moving around on all fours, barking like a dog, and having cooperative parents that treat him like a dog is the kind of playing around with reality that is fun" (58). The child does not necessarily mimic a dog because of the dog's beauty, but the relationship between humor and art is present in the child's playful mimicking. Robinson draws heavily on this attribute of humor in *Gilead* as Ames dotes on the playfulness of his young son's humorous antics, stirring him to delight.

Creative humor also makes use of a healthy imagination. An appropriate view of reality is necessary for a proper correlation between imagination and reality to be delightful. Coleridge's famous defense of the fanciful during his collaboration with Wordsworth addresses the relationship between reality and imagination: "It was agreed, that my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (478). A similar type of suspension is involved in humor. A healthy imagination, or willingness of disbelief, allows a child to delight in pretending he is a dog rather than literally believing he is one. His creativity use of imagination allow for a humorous aesthetic experience through playful mimesis.

While creativity and imagination are aspects of humanity that aid in playful mimicking, they also work to bridge the gap between physical reality and spiritual reality. When man is able to experience aesthetic pleasure in the physical world, he is joining a physical act or experience with a more meaningful, spiritually enriching one in which he experiences some aspect of redemption. In his book *Poetic Theology*, William Dyrness argues that a cultural renewal of aesthetics is necessary for the current generation to be drawn to universal truth. Dyrness shows that man's desire to make something of himself exhibits "the common human hunger for flourishing that moves beyond the ordinary world" (52). But man's fallibility obstructs him from his desire to flourish or succeed. Though human flaws hinder man's success, he does not cease to mimic behaviors that draw him closer to a fulfilling life. This human desire to mimic requires creativity—especially if it involves a world beyond the temporal. Making and creating in essence equip individuals with the ability to see the object of their creativity in a new form, a revitalized, redeemed form. Dyrness believes people will go beyond the ordinary to "build a beautiful life" and "make something new of their lives"; "they want to *make* things that speak of who they are and what they find worth celebrating" (52). His point supports the important concept that creativity is innate and is involved in a person's understanding of self in context. Humor requires imagination for one to "go beyond the ordinary," inspiring creativity that leads not only to delight but also to identity through creating symbols that represent what is meaningful to a person.

What individuals delight in is directly linked to their identity. Dyrness explains the way people form what is meaningful to them through their "symbolic practices" which "provide structure and meaning for people; they are instruments of orientation" (54). In Dyrness' first chapter, he describes four hypothetical secular people who actively participate in their own types

of rituals such as fishing, skiing, painting, and even watching football. These rituals could also be characterized as types of play in which individuals are actively participating in an entertaining or recreational activity that yields enjoyment specific to their tastes. But the enjoyment stems from more than just the ritual itself; the rituals are also enriching because they provide a sense of something greater than the actual activity. For instance, people may refer to a football fan as one who watches football “religiously.” While this may be a figure of speech, the connotation of the phrase actually holds some truth; the committed football fan is likely to participate in an aesthetic experience, and each time he watches his favorite team, he enjoys a sense of fulfillment and meaning. Such an individual has created for himself an enjoyable experience that adds enrichment and pleasure to his livelihood. This connection between creating rituals that are meaningful to a person outside of himself coincides with the delight and playfulness of a humorous creativity: “[S]elf-containedness of aesthetic experience and humor suggests the connection of each with play, which in one sense of that word is some activity done for its own enjoyment” (Morreall 57). And not only does play produce isolated feelings of delight, but “[p]lay, recreation, and celebration are the most authentic forms of life precisely because, when we are playing, recreating, or celebrating, we are immersed in, or ‘fused,’ with the action itself, and those other persons with whom we are participating. Thus, we are involved in and enjoying the living itself” (Goizetta qtd. in Dyrness 55). Humor’s characteristic of providing enjoyment and connecting people with a cultural context of reality makes it essential in the process of illuminating truth.

Yet delight is not the only redeeming factor of these symbolic rituals characterized as play. Dyrness argues these types of rituals provide stability, comfort, meaning, and pleasure, and lend fulfillment that has taken the place of “the formal institution of religion” (6). His argument

is that the current culture has not abandoned religion, but replaced it with less orthodox forms (6). Dyrness' findings further necessitate humor as a means to unveiling deeper spiritual and theological truths because of abandonment of tradition. Dyrness labels these non-traditional rituals that reveal man's desire for an enriched experience of life as "spiritual sites where the affections, the goods of the world, and religious longings meet and interact" (6). They are also "theological . . . places where . . . God is also active, nurturing, calling, and drawing persons—and indeed, all creation—toward the perfection God intends for them" (6). Some may overlook these rituals Dyrness calls attention to as merely mundane practices or meaningless play. Yet when expressed through playful creativity, humor creates contextual meaning for individuals, drawing them to participate in a theological, aesthetic experience, proving that humor is indeed an avenue for man to be made more aware of the soul's need for redemption.

Humility is the second necessary characteristic of good humor, humor that redeems. Distancing one from the immediate, practical needs of oneself or one's circumstances not only relates to the isolated examples of a humorous aesthetic experience but also contributes to the quality of his or her sense of humor. Reinhold Niebuhr pays tribute to the positive redeeming effects the sense of humor has on the self:

Humour is a proof of the capacity of the self to gain a vantage point from which it is able to look at itself. The sense of humour is thus a by-product of self-transcendence. People with a sense of humour do not take themselves too seriously. They are able to "stand off" from themselves, see themselves in perspective, and recognize the ludicrous and absurd aspects of their pretensions. (119-120)

Clearly humor has larger implications than allowing an occasional laugh at a sly remark or a

feeling of delight at the sight of an incongruous scene; a sense of humor has the capacity to create a sense of humility, which is certainly a prevalent theme in both O'Connor and Robinson's fiction. Humility through humor broadens perspective when people distance themselves from immediate circumstances, allowing them to get a glimpse of their placement in the context of the world, even the universe. Humility is a necessary aspect of humor, and provides the foundation for redemption through realization of human weakness.

Because good humor does require humility in order to be fully effective, it is fitting that Calvinists make use of a tool that often highlights man's shortcomings—his depravity. This Calvinistic characteristic is why O'Connor has oft been associated with Calvinist humor in both her short stories and her novels, though her outspokenness about her religious ties makes her far from protestant. Robinson herself, however, makes her association with Calvinism explicit with multiple references to Jonathan Edwards and John Calvin in both her non-fiction and throughout her novels. Michael Dunne in his book *Calvinist Humor* addresses the fact that the term in itself seems an oxymoron. Because Calvinists are generally regarded as overly somber, having their own brand of humor hardly seems fitting. However Calvinist humor emphasizes the importance of humility in humor; it “exists in the perception of imperfection” Dunne describes one type of Calvinist humor is found in delighting in only the imperfection of others (2). This variety reveals the pride in the condescending person, and those who recognize the flawed perspective are able to delight in the circumstance because of their own realization of themselves having the same reaction of the object of humor. O'Connor uses this variety of humor in her pious and prideful characters such as Ruby Hill or Mrs. Turpin. The second type exists in simple association of imperfection with all of mankind. Dunne depicts this type in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*: “Adam was but human—this explains it all. He did not want the apple for the apple's sake; he

only wanted it because it was forbidden. The mistake was in not forbidding the serpent; then he would have eaten the serpent” (1). Most people relate to this quote because of their own experiences in the ironic desire to possess what is prohibited. The emphasis of this type of Calvinistic humor shines light on the flaw of humanity as a whole. The delight in both types of humor cannot be experienced apart from humility because both types emphasize the flaws in mankind. The focus on “fallen man” is, of course, the focus for those within the Calvinist tradition who hold the religious belief that man was once “unfallen,” but Dunne recognizes even those who do not hold to this religious belief can relate to the Calvinist type of humor because “human behavior will seem unsatisfactory mostly when it can be contrasted to some theoretically preferable mode of behavior” (3). This fact makes the Calvinist genre of humor, even if individuals do not recognize the biblical fall of man, a useful tool in causing individuals to recognize the difference between the human condition and another, more “preferable” one. This truth evident in Calvinistic humor is even inferred in Disney’s assertion of humor’s worth:

Some delvers into comedy tell us that man laughs most derisively at the follies of his neighbors. This they contend is the cackle of a mean emotion, unworthy of civilized people. I have not found it so. From my long observation of moviegoers, I am sure that the great mass of Americans, at least, are laughing most heartily at their own foibles when they seem to be howling loudest at the mistakes and awkwardness of others. To me, that seems wonderful. It demands a high respect for the power and value of humor, and humility in its use. (328)

Though Disney does not allude to the fallen man, he does find worth in humor as it eliminates pride. Even if the “preferable” human condition, the one without pride, is theoretical for secular audiences, humor still opens the door for man’s humility and acknowledgement of his inability

to reach the better standard, which is essential for him gaining a sense of self in a universal context.

The epistemological questions about identity and origin for which the human soul seeks answers are innate in humans. Man realizes the lack of congruity in the world when he sees how attitudes like greed and hatred are humiliating rather than fulfilling because they do not prove congruous with man's inward longings. Despite their unfulfillment, people continue to search for solutions on earth, constantly working towards attaining a "more preferable" existence. Allen Tate addresses this issue in modern thinking: "This modern mind sees only half the horse—that half which may become a dynamo, or an automobile, or any other horse powered machine . . . The religious mind, on the other hand, has this respect; it wants the whole horse and to be satisfied with nothing less" (157). The physical world offers man only half of the human experience; for him to experience the whole, man must take note of the spiritual aspects of his humanity and live in awareness that each realm contributes equally to the whole man. Humor helps realize this juncture between the two realms, acts as a gateway between them, and enlightens man of the truth of existence beyond the material. David Eggenschweiler notes this "whole horse" perspective in O'Connor⁴ which is evident in her short fiction through her constant sacramental references and correlations between the sacred and the secular. Firmly rooted in Christian themes, Robinson also shares this habit of using sacramental motifs, and both authors skillfully weave humor into their references to holiness. By redeeming aspects of the temporal world and allowing man the perspective to see how those temporal, physical qualities

⁴ Eggenschweiler says O'Connor "had a great respect for the whole horse, who saw life from many perspectives, but who also believed that what she saw was a whole that demanded complex and integrated demands from the writer" (11). Her juxtaposition of grotesque elements along with sacramental elements in "The Temple of the Holy Ghost" is an example of the "integrated demands" O'Connor artfully meets in her fiction.

are lacking, humor leads man toward finding a means to fulfillment and wholeness.

A third aspect of humor, which Morreall fails to pay ample tribute to, is its reliance upon truthfulness. If humor is not honest in some regard, there is little or no delight—it does not function properly. For instance, most people find the fact that an instance is relatable or “true to life” usually makes the instance funny. A woman who is rushing to find the keys to her car in order to be on time for an important business meeting finds her three-year-old standing over the toilet looking at the keys. Though perhaps slightly tragic for the woman, at a distance, most people find this instance humorous because people can relate it to their own lives when things do not go as planned. Yet we can delight even in the severely tragic and pitiful instances of which O’Connor, Welty, and Robinson provide many examples) because they are realistic, relatable depictions of reality. In Morreall’s example, the child who pretends to be a dog barks because that characteristic is true to the object he mimics and contributes to the full delight of the aesthetic experience. In their literature, Welty, O’Connor, and Robinson pair these types of “true-to-life” instances with humor in order to bring pleasure through aesthetic delight, and at the same time convey the reality of human nature. Disney claims that humor can hardly be avoided because of its counteractive connection with the truth of humanity: “An unfunny thing about humor is that you can’t think about it very long without becoming serious. And maybe you can’t be ponderous about human affairs very long without getting the giggles. If these seem inconsistent, it is only because the sober and the silly sides of our human struggle for survival and for perfection lie so close together” (327). Humor’s truthful quality in realizing the inevitability of man’s folly provides a way for people to cope with and even further understand their context of reality.

Biblical examples of humor provide further evidence that supports humor’s truthful

quality. Samuel Joeckel promotes that humor must be based on truth because even Jesus Christ himself uses humor. Referencing Christ's naming of Simon Peter as the "Rock," Joeckel explains how Elton Trueblood's interpretation of this part of Scripture is humorous because of the incongruity: Simon Peter, who betrays Jesus three times, hardly seems the stable type; thus, Trueblood considers this naming an example of Jesus' ironic use of humor. Joeckel recognizes the potential accusation that this type of humor also partly ridicules Peter because of his flaws, and therefore exhibits traits of the Superiority theory⁵. However, the ridicule and aggression associated with the Superiority theory contradict Jesus' actions, message, and compassion for people. Trueblood connects Jesus' use of humor with truth by its "unmasking of error and, thereby, the emergence of truth" (qtd. in Joeckel 418). Joeckel's example shows how humor can indeed "unmask" truth. And the fact that the Bible contains humorous elements testifies to both the purity and power of humor's capability to communicate that truth.

Further analysis of humor's relationship to truth reveals that it is not only telling of the reality of physical existence, but also of man's spiritual existence. Niebuhr makes a significant connection between and faith and humor that is attributed to the human condition:

The intimate relation between humour and faith is derived from the fact that both deal with the incongruities of our existence . . . But any view of the whole immediately creates the problem of how the incongruities of life are to be dealt with; for the effort to understand the life, and our place in it, confronts us with inconsistencies and incongruities which do not fit into any neat picture of the

⁵ The Superiority theory was one of the first theories of laughter and humor, and Plato is most credited with its invention. In Morreall's *Taking Laughter Seriously*, he describes the Superiority theory as being characterized by self-elevation, laughing at others' follies, and a condescending attitude. These vices characteristic of laughter were reasons why Plato feared the teaching of comedy in his perfect Republic, believing that "Men of worth should not be overcome by laughter." Thomas Hobbes was also wary of laughter's reflection of one's character" (3-5).

whole. Laughter is our reaction to immediate incongruities and those which do not affect us essentially. Faith is the only possible response to the ultimate incongruities of existence which threaten the very meaning of our life. (112)

Niebuhr is saying the mishaps that occur throughout daily life, (recall the example of the woman's incident with the keys), are relieved or excused through humor. Yet the greater incongruity—the ultimate incongruity—is that humanity exists on the earth seemingly only to live and die. This scenario in itself cannot be rectified simply through a humorous aesthetic experience, but humor does reveal the smallness of man and his constant efforts to achieve meaning. If man sees himself in only a helpless state, he must realize that view is incompatible or incongruent with the effort of surviving and succeeding that seems a common desire of everything else in his universal context. Humor is the tool that enables individuals to sense incongruity, yet humor by itself cannot fully redeem man from this incongruity; humor is the compass that directs man toward finding the truth about reconciliation once he perceives his deficiency or unwholeness. But, as Niebuhr points out, this incongruity cannot be fully resolved without faith. Faith provides hope in a meaningful existence that reconciles the incongruity of man's helpless condition on earth. Humor's truthfulness about man's flawed condition then places him in the direction to search for a way to see himself as whole, meaningful, and reconciled to a non-helpless state; in other words, humor provides the foundation for man to see his need to be redeemed from his incongruent or un-whole condition. Denise T. Askin asserts that the aim of humor, as confirmed by Kierkegaard and Niebuhr, is to portray truthfully reality so that it achieves "*anamnesis*—its recall of our fully embodied humanity" and also ultimately, freedom (48). When a person obtains this liberation and wholeness in humanity through acceptance of truth, he experiences redemption through seeing meaning and fullness anew in his

life.

True spiritual redemption occurs when the human soul is liberated from its fallen state and can then see through the perspective of the “unfallen” state. Those who say this “preferable” human existence is only theoretical have rejected faith that the soul can ever exist or has ever existed in a redeemed, unfallen state. In single instances of humor, acceptance of truth is based on a willing suspension of disbelief in order experience the freedom for one to delight in the aesthetic experience. Askin states, “Mikhail Bakhtin identifies the prototypical comic movement as one of liberation (Averintsev 80) from whatever obstacles impede the life force⁶” (49). Such obstacles that prevent the comedy of redemption are usually characterized by strictness, practicality, or some kind of constraint or oppression, such as the lack of faith.

In the example of the rushing business woman whose keys are unfortunately submersed in toilet water, the situation is only considered humorous when one allows himself or herself to be relieved from the practical worries of what will happen to the woman if she is late, or what type of discipline her three-year-old will receive. The scenario is humorous based on the liberating aspect of faith; most people assume, if they even give further thought to the situation, that everything turned out okay for both the working mother and the child, making the scenario appropriate for a humorous aesthetic experience. If the “flexibility, adaptability, [or] grace” needed for the given scenario is constrained, one is not free to take part in the aesthetic experience. Mark Weeks agrees that humor “is a reaction against containment, against monolithic and comparatively fixed structure by ideally irrepressible libidinal energies” (133). This liberating aspect of humor shows that when people participate in a humorous experience,

⁶ “Life force” refers to Bergson’s term *elan vital*, renamed by Askin: “The *elan vital*, what I will call the life force, is what gives flexibility, adaptability, and grace to the human. Whatever constrains the *elan vital*, therefore, distorts the human comically.”

whether they realize it or not, the “irrepressible” emotional or psychological force which recognizes the human condition liberates the aesthetic experience from the source of “containment.” Without faith to surpass the restricting nature of practicality, humor would be helpless in freeing the mind to delight in the humorous aesthetic.

Humor enables the mind to free itself from physical or logical restrictions, enabling delight in the things transcendent of the spatial, such as imagination and spirituality. According to Weeks and Bergson, humor functions through recognizing and allowing for flexibility in the human condition. If life as we know it were stable, never incongruous, always perfect and whole, there would be no need for flexibility, adaptability, or grace to grant freedom in order to delight in life’s shortcomings or incongruities. Yet the essence of humor is based on this need for grace, for redemption of the flawed human soul into something that is positive, delightful, and good. Humor itself cannot grant this freedom, but humor is a universal vehicle by which perspective of self in the midst of the universe, the need for grace, and the desire for redemption are made evident to the human soul.

While Morreall does not claim to hold to the redemptive power of humor or even use the term “redeem,” the attributes he gives to humor only further prove its role in redeeming: “In humor we are open to looking at things in any and every possible light and so are freed from a too narrow view of things. We are especially liberated from a merely practical view, in which only a small cluster of problems engages our interest at any one time. In the humorous frame of mind, all experience—even failure—can be enjoyed” (65). When humor is truly redemptive, the soul can see hope beyond its folly by resting in the fact this world, by nature, is flawed, so it would be unnatural if failures never occurred; but greater still, redemptive humor produces enjoyment by presenting the hope that man’s incongruous condition can eventually be made

whole. Morreall quotes Penjon, a psychologist who believes humor “frees us from vanity, on the one hand, and from pessimism on the other, by keeping us larger than what we do, and greater than what can happen to us” (66). This attitude of humor could be dangerous when dealing with the sort of humor that does not redeem, or when one chooses not to seek the truth that humor directs him toward. But when the superiority and humility associated with humor are truthful and good, the redeeming factor can lead to the soul’s redemption, breaking the chains of pride, instilling hope, giving perspective, and guiding one to Truth that can save the soul.

So to answer the initial question of whether humor is good for the soul: yes, it is. But it is not only good for the soul because it awakens humility, creativity, truthfulness, and freedom; its ultimate goodness and value lie in its capability to lead toward a full sense of redemption. The complexity of this “sixth sense,” as Disney terms humor, which has been the subject of study among philosophers and scholars for centuries, is so complex because it has the capability of realizing harmony in the midst of incongruence, reaching the spiritual through the physical, and redeeming old, flawed perspectives with new, truthful ones. The thousands of years spent philosophizing over the aspects of humor yield interesting insight and analysis; but for an innately human sense that breaks through realms, leads to Truth, and even produces delight, the study of the subject hardly seems to scratch the surface.

Understanding the redemptive power of humor in literature, however, certainly calls for further study of humor as aesthetic and redemptive. Welty, O’Connor, and Robinson skillfully envelop their works in a diversity of humorous elements, yet each author’s individual style successfully reveals important aspects of redemption. These authors work within a common context and are able to use that context to accentuate man’s need for redemption. By effectively creating characters and situations that accentuate the creative, humbling, truthful, and liberating workings

of humor, each author grasps the power of humor and achieves the common goal of redeeming.

Analyzing humor in their works does not answer all the questions to the phenomena, but each of the three authors provides insight into the different ways humor is necessary for redemption.

Chapter 2

Weltyan Wit: Myth, Mississippi, and Mystery

“When I was young enough to spend a long time buttoning my shoes in the morning, I’d listen toward the hall: Daddy upstairs was shaving in the morning and Mother downstairs was frying the bacon. They would begin whistling back and forth to each other . . . their song almost floated with laughter.”

—Eudora Welty, *One Writer’s Beginnings*

In her fiction, Eudora Welty both values and varies her humor. For instance, the situational humor in “Why I live at the P.O.” differs in tone from the humor depicted in the ironic fairy-tale motif in “A Visit from Charity,” the grotesque humor in “Petrified Man,” and the irony in “A Worn Path”⁷. Though each of these stories conveys a different shade of humor, they all commonly contain elements of redemption in their humor. Welty’s humor also includes other elements that contribute to the uniqueness of her craft and make her stories especially intriguing. Her sense of place, usually Mississippi, adds a realistic and relatable comedy that sets up a cultural context for her works. But rather than incorporating typical religious symbols and references associated with the “Bible Belt” South, Welty laces mythical elements throughout her short stories to act as the connector between physical and spiritual realms. Also present in her works is a focus on female characters in the highly patriarchic South whose roles humorously highlight either the need or power of redemption.

Welty began writing stories during the Depression, and continued her career until the late

⁷ A chronological publication of the five stories reviewed in this chapter is as follows:
 1939 “Petrified Man” — *Southern Review*, Spring
 1941 “A Worn Path” — *Atlantic Monthly*, February
 1941 “Why I Live at the P.O.” — *Atlantic Monthly*, April
 1941 “A Visit of Charity” — *Decision*, June
 1942 “The Wide Net” — *Harper’s Magazine*, May

eighties⁸. She says that her stories “have reflected their own present time” and “are written from within” (x). A native of Mississippi, Welty certainly wrote about the place she knew best and drew from her own experiences. Yet while she was born and raised in the South, Welty, unlike Flannery O’Connor and Marilynne Robinson, does not consistently emphasize any religious beliefs in her writings; however, each of her stories tell of the human condition, and themes of redemption cannot be mistaken in her literature. She clearly touches on important moral issues such as abortion, marriage, and charity; in spite of her lack of overt religious concern, both the story and the truth in her fiction are revealing of a standard—of Truth.

In one of her earlier short stories, “A Worn Path,” Welty’s sense of place contributes to the humor through Phoenix Jackson’s interaction with her setting. Located in the Natchez Trace like many of her writings, the story tracks Phoenix’s long journey through the countryside to complete a task she almost forgets by the time she reaches her destination. During her long walk through the woods on a winter day, Phoenix encounters the typical wildlife creatures one may find outdoors, but warns them, “Out of my way, all you foxes, owls, beetles, jack rabbits, coons and wild animals! . . . I got a long way” (*The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 142). The character’s words are already humorous because her steadfast determination clashes with her actual situation: she is an elderly woman making a long foot-journey in the dead of winter. The season is significant because Welty uses nature as a setting to create a contextual element of play. In this story, Phoenix’s physical environment emphasizes the humor of the situation and engages the audience with the comedy of this human situation, which if literally depicted, should probably create more sympathy than amusement.

⁸ Welty happened to have Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks as the “first readers of [her] first stories” which led to six published works in *The Southern Review* in the late thirties (*The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* ix) Her autobiography *One Writer’s Beginnings*, published in 1983, was her last major publication until her death in 2001.

Phoenix, with her resolute attitude, would hardly show need for such sympathy despite her obvious weaknesses; this incongruous picture of the old woman's steadfast resolve adds humor to the character through her disregard of the dangerous journey ahead. Another one of Welty's frequent portrayals of stubborn southern women, Phoenix assumes responsibility for both herself and her grandson for whom she is making the journey. Her determination plays into the humor of the story as this woman, who "was very old and small" moving as "a pendulum in a grandfather clock" (142), gives no inclination that traveling alone down a wooded trail could be dangerous for her. And though she is feeble, she confidently embarks on the long walk through Natchez Trace.

Phoenix's journey in "A Worn Path" alludes to the mythical elements Welty often uses in her writings. In her autobiography, Welty tells of her interest in mythical stories; at a young age her parents introduced her to mystery through myth and legend when they gave her *Every Child's Story Book (One Writer's Beginnings 8)*. The mystery and story she read about as a young girl would later inspire the mythical elements of her own fiction. And though, as Joseph Millichap points out, she was not as formally educated in the Greek classics as her contemporaries in the Fugitives clan, she educated herself well enough in the discipline to incorporate it into her fiction ("Eudora Welty's Personal Epic: Autobiography, Art, and Classical Myth" 77). In fact, most every work has allusions to myth, and in "A Worn Path" John F. Fleischauer notes the obvious representation of the phoenix as well as the plotting of Phoenix's journeying, which are similar to the events in Homer's *Odyssey* ("The Focus of Mystery: Eudora Welty's Prose Style" 72). The old woman's name is quite fitting, since the mythical figure of a

phoenix⁹ is old of age and has regenerative youth. But Welty's inclusion of myth provides more than characterization in her short stories; the mentioning of myth deepens the stories, adding a spiritual dimension to the physical settings. Fleischauer claims that Welty's use of myth "leaves the critical reader confused from a lack of precision. Myth is used for effect rather than for meaning, and even the myths are confused, because Miss Welty's tendency is to change the ordinary into the mysterious" (73). Welty understands that, to create art that honestly depicts the human experience so that people can relate to it, incorporating mystery into the creation is necessary. Though this may sound like a paradox, the mysteries of Phoenix—how she ventures out in her old age based on compassion for her grandson, how she dances with a scarecrow in a cornfield, or how she sees visions before her as she lies in the ditch worriless of her current predicament—somehow make her more understandable, more realistic, more human through her connection with the spiritual realm.

This mythical element does more than add mystery and depth to Phoenix; it also allows her character to saturate the work with an air of otherworldliness, making the story complete by representing the physical and spiritual realms. Mystery makes the story whole, and this wholeness allows for the "suspension of disbelief" factor, discussed in the previous chapter, as a working tool to set the platform for the humor. The flexibility that the mystery lends induces imagination for the audience; rather than viewing Phoenix in her literal situation, with eyes of sympathy and pity, the audience can suspend its disbelief of the old woman's strength (and perhaps sanity), and enjoy the humor in Phoenix's comments that make the story come alive.

⁹ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a phoenix is defined as follows: "In classical mythology: a bird resembling an eagle but with sumptuous red and gold plumage, which was said to live for five or six hundred years in the deserts of Arabia, before burning itself to ashes on a funeral pyre ignited by the sun and fanned by its own wings, only to rise from its ashes with renewed youth to live through another such cycle" (def. 1).

The unexpected joy she experiences when she realizes what she thought was a ghost turns out only to be a scarecrow is an example of the mystery working to bend the reality while not completely creating an alternate one. Phoenix jovially laughs at herself claiming, “I ought to be shut up for good . . . My senses is gone. I too old. I the oldest people I ever know. Dance old scarecrow . . . while I dancing with you” (144). Her statement reveals the reality of Phoenix’s old age, yet the fact that she wants to dance with the scarecrow is a youthful inclination. Still her reaction is believable because it fits so well within the mystery of her character. Rather causing questions about what may seem like contradictions in Phoenix’s character, her puzzling antics deepen the mystery of the old soul and yield humor rather than disbelief.

The vivacity exerted by the lovable and slightly mischievous Phoenix Jackson makes Welty’s short fiction piece memorable. Notably, Welty focuses primarily on women in her stories, and in “A Worn Path” the feebly strong female figure not only contests certain societal norms of Welty’s times¹⁰, but also represents strong family values that Welty admits she wants to convey through her fiction¹¹. Phoenix Jackson is a beautiful example of someone who honors family values. Risking her life repeatedly to retrieve the medicine that will relieve her grandson’s ailing throat, she symbolizes honesty and loyalty to her family. And yet she does not make an ordeal of her journey; the joviality, senselessness, and nonresistance Phoenix shows through her humorous comments make the virtue humbly show through her. While she is no saint (she does,

¹⁰ Maria Teresa Castillo emphasizes Welty’s centralization on the woman in her article “*Delta Wedding: The Return of Laura to Jackson*”: “If this writer is linked to the tradition of the Southern Literary Renaissance, which sees the South as patriarchal and its tradition as problematic, then Welty seems to look for her originality and personalization by writing not exactly about the patriarchal South – as Faulkner did – but about feminine characters” (9).

¹¹ In an interview with Gayle Graham Yeats, Welty says, when asked about conveying family values, “I am interested in human relationships. That is my true core. That is what I try to write about. Certainly it begins with the family and extends out” (“An Interview with Eudora Welty” 101).

after all, steal a coin with the full understanding that God is watching), the comedy of her character strengthens the values she depicts.

Welty's humor in "A Worn Path" redeems Phoenix's mischief and cunning through eventually revealing her honesty with herself and her loyalty to her grandson. Without the humorous element in the story, we would see a pathetic elderly woman running into strange obstacles; but her quirky personality is humorous and shows the reality of her human journey. Rather than hoping for retribution for Phoenix, we smile at her when she steals the coin; rather than cringing when she topples over into a ditch, we chuckle because we know it is just like her to admit she is "lying on her back like a June-bug waiting to be turned over" (Welty 145). And the aesthetic experience of the reaction is made possible because humor in the story makes the circumstances relatable to human experience; Phoenix represents the error in human nature. She is a testimony of those who know well enough to live steadfastly the purest of virtues, as seen in her compassion for and loyalty to her grandson, but who also struggle with sin, pictured in her inclination to steal a coin from a helpful stranger. "A Worn Path" creatively portrays these conflicting sides of human nature humorously enough that it is almost comforting. But by eventually using the stolen coin to buy a gift for her grandson, Phoenix's journey provides a refreshing view of how her selflessness redeems her originally greedy motives.

Though Phoenix's flaws are easy to overlook because her character allows her to be mischievous, the humor in "Petrified Man" addresses larger, more morally controversial issues that reveal the gravity of the character's flaws. In this story, Welty's humor is more grotesque than the humor in "A Worn Path," but she still implements the mythical allusions that add a mysterious realm to her story. The myth, grotesqueness, and humor in "Petrified Man" culminate in a southern beauty shop in Mississippi next to a "shoddy travelin' freak show" (20) that fools

even the “smart” beautician (28). The gossipy nature of the beauty shop already sets the tone for jealous remarks and disingenuous dialogue so common in the seeming sweetness of southern women. Most people would agree with Welty’s representation of the beauty parlor and its female accessories, which allows a contextual basis for understanding the humor of the setting’s reality. Though Welty may draw on a stereotypical representation of the gossipy clients and cigarette-smoking cosmetologists, the portrayal is one most women, and even men who have come into contact with such a scene, can appreciate, which already lends the element of humor based simply on the setting. Welty’s colorful southern scene offers humor and authenticity, but also works with the layered elements of myth spread throughout the fictional snapshot of events in small-town Mississippi.

The parlor setting also provides the perfect opportunity for the mythical images of women, especially mythical women with concern for their beauty. The way the main character, Mrs. Fletcher, endures the pulling and pinning of her hairdresser, Leota, is telling of her desire for beauty as her hair is styled into Medusa-like tendrils. Though the name “Medusa” is never mentioned in the story, the allusion is clear in the title. According to Thomas Bullfinch, Medusa has more in common with the story than simply the desire for beauty:

She was once a beautiful maiden whose hair was her chief glory, but as she dared to vie in beauty with Minerva, the goddess deprived her of her charms and changed her beautiful ringlets into hissing serpents. She became a cruel monster of so frightful an aspect that no living thing could behold her without being turned into stone. All around the cavern where she dwelt might be seen the stony figures of men and animals which had chanced to catch a glimpse of her and had been petrified with the sight. (80).

The description of Medusa fits closely with the characteristics of Mrs. Fletcher. Her concern with her beauty is apparent when he fears she could have “caught a thing like [dandruff] from [her] husband” (18). She is also more concerned about the way her body is changing during her pregnancy than she is with the more important fact of the pregnancy—a newborn child. Most importantly, these similarities draw humor through capitalizing on Mrs. Fletcher’s petty concerns and vanity. Though her character is not as likeable as Phoenix, the fact that Mrs. Fletcher’s view of herself is clearly higher than it ought to be makes her unwarranted error of pride humorously amusing. For instance, when Leota tell her of this “freak show” next door, she turns up her nose to the thought of anyone enjoying such a spectacle: “I despise freaks,” she tells Leota, unaware of the fact that her character is representative of “a cruel monster” (Bullfinch 80). But the ironic humor here keeps Mrs. Fletcher from being hated, and instead makes her the object of the humorous aesthetic experience.

Welty continues to focus on women characters in this story, but unlike Phoenix’s primarily positive representation of a female character, Mrs. Fletcher is selfish, jealous, and weak. Quickly into the beauty shop blather, serious issues telling of human vice, such as abortion and hypocrisy, arise within the entertaining dialogue. Infuriated that the young, “attractive” (Welty 17) new girl in town, Mrs. Pike, has tattled on Mrs. Fletcher’s pregnancy to the parlor women, which basically means the whole town now knows her secret, Mrs. Fletcher can no longer have an illegal abortion¹² without receiving disdain from her neighbors. Her easily infuriated character makes her humorous and trifling; nonetheless, she is dealing with a life or death issue. Though the middle-aged maternal character differs greatly from Phoenix, she does display redeeming qualities by the story’s end. Perhaps she enjoys the fact that the unruly child,

¹²Abortion would not have been legal in Mississippi until 1973 after the *Roe Versus Wade* Case.

Billy Boy, belongs to Mrs. Pike, and maybe she is glad to know Leota is still on the same, if not lower, financial plane than she is, but she does resolve to carry out her pregnancy when she states, “I guess I’ll have to learn how to spank little old bad boys” (28). Much like Phoenix, Mrs. Fletcher, too, shows a mixture of both good and bad qualities, though her bad qualities outweigh the good.

Despite these weighty issues, the frivolity of the beauty shop setting combined with Mrs. Fletcher’s consistent fussiness places the situation in a humorous realm in which the severity of the heavier issues is not lessened, but rather intensified because the aesthetic of humor contextualizes the reality of the situation. However, Welty’s formula for funny situations is not conventional. One example of her unusual style in “Petrified Man” is that the mythical features are not directly loyal to their original legends, but they are present in the characters and contribute to the irony of the story as Mrs. Fletcher’s similarities with Medusa pinpoint her vanity and poke fun at her pettiness. Another example is that the woman figure, whose view of herself socially is probably far higher than the true value of her character, ends up being the redemptive character at the end of the story. Kenneth Bearden would characterize these features just as Welty characterizes the writings of Virginia Woolf in her foreword to *To The Lighthouse*: “Employing phrases such as ‘perpetually changing,’ ‘unpredictable,’ ‘tricky,’ and ‘illusory,’ Welty emphasizes a most interesting quality of the work, a ‘rhythm’ which forms ‘a pattern of waking and sleeping, presence and absence, living and living no longer, between clamorous memory and lapses of mind’ (ix). (“Monkeying Around” 65). Bearden believes these terms describe Welty’s works in her novels, but these terms also describe the style she uses in her short stories; these qualities in “Petrified Man” contribute to an “essence of rhythm between extremes, that very same essence of liminality and ambiguity” (65). Certainly Mrs. Fletcher, whom we can

safely call a hormonal, flippant woman, represents the “perpetually changing” and “unpredictable” elements of the story. At one point she hints at aborting her child, and one week later she is excited to learn how to discipline children. Her story is “illusory” because though Mrs. Fletcher is a character one may find difficulty in sympathizing with, she is also the one who in the end offers a hint of grace. Certainly these elements weave in and out of the realms of the temporal and moral, and truly do they make the term “liminal” fitting for the fiction because the story places the audience on the threshold of something larger than an entertaining story. The finicky Mrs. Fletcher who is mostly intolerable in the beginning, is both redeemed and redeeming by the end of the story. Her interaction with Billy Boy reveals she has accepted her state and is willing to embrace the fact that she is pregnant. Her “fixed smile” describes Mrs. Fletcher, for the first time, in an amiable light. Also, her character exhibits the redemptive aspect of the story by acting in accordance with the idea of family values, which Welty seeks to convey in her works.

While “Petrified Man” is redemptive in its *inclusion* of familial values, “Why I Live at the P.O.” also redeems through familial values, but the humor and language highlight those values through the Rondo family’s *exclusion* of one value in particular: forgiveness. In the small fictional town of China Grove, Mississippi, in a boisterous household, Sister tells the story of how she ends up sleeping in a post office. Her perspective paints a vivid picture of the Rondo family’s lack of simple values that prevent them from arriving at a simple resolution. The Fourth of July frenzy begins as Sister’s counterpart, Stella-Rondo, arrives unexpectedly with an unannounced daughter. The domestic struggle Sister faces inspires her very own independence day: the day she moves out of her house into the local Post Office. The hilarity in this Weltyan story indeed comes primarily in the point of view from which the story is written, as Sister

describes her elaborate exodus from a frustrated household to her newfound freedom.

Though “A Worn Path” and “Petrified Man” have more explicit references to elements of myth, the same effect takes place in “Why I Live At the P.O.” in the story’s form: dialogue. The language in the story adds hilarity to the situation, but the language is also the source of mystery. Patricia S. Yeager identifies Welty’s use of language in her novels with Bakhtin’s term “dialogic imagination.” She recognizes feminists Helene Cixous, Marguerite Duras, and Luce Irigaray’s theories that emphasize “woman’s writing is an ecstatic possibility, a labor of mystery” that exceeds the kind of language men can convey (Cixous sum. in Yeager 955). The mysterious aspect is true of both Welty’s writing and Sister’s dialogue. Yeager summarizes the characteristics of language that conform it to this limitless and almost indefinable form: “Disruptive, emotional, nonhegemonic, language, according to Bakhtin, is open to intention and change. Moreover, both spoken and written language are dynamic and plural, and, as such, language resists all attempts to foster a unitary or absolute system of expression within its boundaries” (Yeager 955). Welty masters the form and content of her story by making the eruptions of the Rondo family take place in this primarily female household, inducing the humorous experience, but also adding the element of indecisiveness and unpredictability. By using the dialogic imagination, the wealth of content is heartily poured from Sister’s point of view and offers an aesthetic experience that would not be fit in any other form.

The argumentative nature of the dialogue in the story becomes the primary medium for humor, revealing truths about the characters and creating context through the hilarity of family feuding. In an interview, Welty comments on the story saying, “I love to write dialogue but it’s very hard to prune it and make it sharp and make it advance the plot and reveal the characters--both characters--the one listening and the one talking. You can use it to do all kinds of things. I

like to do it because it's hard, I guess. I really like it. I laugh when I write those things” (qtd. in Russel n. pag.). The laughter Welty mentions is pivotal in her response and, in “Why I Live At the P.O.,” is primarily due to the character’s dialect. The southern vernacular plays a critical role in Sister’s delivery because it depicts not only the southern culture, but also more locally, a specific family’s linguistic tradition. The constant “so he says,” “she says,” and “I says” back and forth across the dinner table, up the stairway, and over the stove contextualize the reality of this family’s life and locality, providing a point of reference for the humor to be understood. The hot house with open windows and the crowded kitchen in which Sister has to “stretch two chickens over five people and a completely unannounced child” (Welty 46) are images from Sister’s point of view that only make her particular dilemma even more humorous because of her dramatic and perhaps exaggerative tone. The family’s constant bickering is what drives Sister out of the house—and over Stella-Rondo’s frivolous false accusations such as her wanting Papa-Daddy to trim his whiskers and her mocking Uncle Rondo in the pink kimono. The point of view reveals an injustice towards Sister, but her bias also conceals whether or not her situation is as pitiful as she portrays. The humor relies on the language’s flux of meaning in the family context, with Sister’s constant insinuation that she is right, and the other members’ having some grounds of disagreement. This aspect of accusation and unreliability in the language creates a humorous aesthetic based on the family’s frivolity and inability to reconcile differences.

Sister’s quasi-tragic situation—that none of her family seems to believe anything she says—is similar to that of a Greek mythological character. Cassandra, who was cursed by Apollo with the gift of prophecy upon the condition that no one would believe her, seems like a fitting doppelganger for the distressed sister: “‘*He left her—*mark my words’ I says. ‘That’s Mr. Whitaker. I know Mr. Whitaker. After all, I knew him first. I said from the beginning he’d up

and leave her. I foretold everything thing that's happened'" (55). Yet despite her presumed accuracy of foretelling, the family only rebukes her for making Stella-Rondo hysterical after Sister's uproar. Cassandra is a truly tragic character whose curse eventually leads to her death; her likeness in Sister only reveals that Sister's problem is not as tragic as she believes it. Though there is a degree of pity that can be allotted to Sister, her petty circumstances in the story make her the object of situational humor rather than the object of tragic pity: no matter how dishonest or corrupt Stella-Rondo is, Sister is the one who wrongly takes the blame. And the Greek tragedy references continue in the way Sister reacts to that blame. Rather than reconciling rationally with her family, she reacts in excess, completely removing herself from her family's presence and communication. Humorously, Sister's excess is moving into a Post Office, and her stubborn attempt to be taken seriously and appreciated only further reveals her futility.

Again in Welty's fiction, we see the jealous, yet strong-willed woman portrayed in a primarily amusing fashion rather than a pitiable one. In response to a hostile Papa-Daddy worrying that the falsely accused Sister wants him to cut his ever-growing beard, a traitor Uncle Rondo who suddenly decides to side with Stella-Rondo, a Mama who constantly demands Sister's apologies toward Stella-Rondo, and a sister who "unfairly" took Mr. Whitaker from her and now brings a bratty young daughter into the picture, Sister resolutely extricates herself from the situation: "And I'll tell you it didn't take me any longer than a minute to make up my mind what to do. There I was with the whole entire house on Stella-Rondo's side and turned against me. If I have anything at all I have pride" (Welty 53). With the clear quality of what Greek myth would label as hubris which is the recurring vice of the victims of tragedy, Sister willingly and resentfully removes all her belongings and relocates to the P.O. Yet the tone in Welty's story does not generate sadness at the fact of the departure like it may in a true tragedy; rather, the

relocation of Sister acts as the punishment to the rest of the family for their mistreatment of her. But ironically, as a result of her pride, Sister punishes herself as well because she is now confined to the tight spaces of the state's "next to smallest P.O." (47).

The redemption in the story relates back to Welty's own comments on the form of this story and the reason she chose to write it in the manner she did: laughter. The issues in the Rondo household such as sibling rivalry, divorce, birth out of wedlock, and substance abuse¹³ are serious issues that many families and individuals can relate to, but their presence in the story is not the focus of the family's dysfunction. Welty acknowledges these shortcomings, but the primary source of the corruption in this story, the lack of forgiveness, is conveyed through the language. The humor in the story disguises the larger issues, emphasizing Sister's propensity to overreact to frivolous issues in stubbornness and pride. Sister's last line magnifies the foolishness in her pride and highlights her flawed relentlessness: "And if Stella-Rondo should come to me this minute . . . I'd simply put my fingers in both my ears and refuse to listen" (56). The beauty in Welty's writing is that the story is not didactic, but the humor highlights the simple solution to a family's primary problem: forgiveness. The dialect and point of view within the language, the context of the family, and the allusions that add to the tragic flaws of Sister's character, create a humorous story that redeems through revealing the importance of and need for forgiveness.

Only two months after the publication of "Why I Live at the P.O.," Welty introduces another young woman, much younger than the others previously discussed, and uses irony and myth to accentuate the young girl's flawed motives. Welty uses a satirical fairy-tale motif in the story which invites a sense of mystery and works to highlight the shortcomings of the girl's

¹³ Uncle Rondo claims he is "poisoned," but Sister states, "what he'd really done is drunk another bottle of that prescription" (Welty 48).

character. The combination of character, setting, and circumstance provides ironic humor throughout, which is essential in revealing the redemptive message of pride's poison.

Taking a step back from the blatantly southern setting, Welty instead lavishes the story with the mythical approach of familiar children's tales, but uses the allusions to accentuate the irony in the main character, which is critical in revealing the story's redemptive theme. Marian, a "Campfire Girl," emerges from the bus in a "red coat, and her straight yellow hair . . . hanging down loose from the pointed white cap all the little girls were wearing that year" (Welty 113). Based on Welty's description of Marian heading towards the ominous nursing home, one cannot dismiss the image of the "Little Red Riding Hood" walking through the dangerous forest to meet her grandmother. Yet unlike the kind, caring Riding Hood who places herself in harm's way in order to care for her grandmother, Marian makes the excursion to the nursing home because she "ha[s] to pay a visit to some old lady" (113). Unfortunately for Marian, rather than meeting a threatening wolf as the fairy-tale commonly unfolds, she meets two threatening old women whom, to her, might as well be ravaging animals. The child's name insinuates reference to Maid Marian, and since she is a Campfire Girl, should define her as a brave and noble female character; however, Welty makes clear that Marian views the act of charity as only a chore for which she will receive a badge. This warped act of nobility is another example of Fleischauer's idea of the confusion Welty sometimes incorporates in her myths. Either way, the story quickly enters into an other-worldly account as the young girl feels she is "walking on waves" because of the buckled floor, and smells "the inside of a clock" as she infiltrates the already mysterious home.

Besides the description of Marian, the story contains several other features common to children's fairy tales that contribute to the myth-based humor in the story. But aside from their

appearance, the women's unpleasant presence also emerges in their hateful dialogue toward each other: "'You mustn't pay attention to old Addie . . . She's ailing today.' 'Will you shut your mouth? Said the woman in bed. 'I am not'" (115). The bickering eventually escalates, and Marian is left in the room alone with one woman pitifully whimpering and the other woefully preying on her, asking for money: "Oh, little girl, have you a penny to spare for a poor old woman that's not got anything of her own?" (117). The terror of the circumstance causes Marian to rip herself from the woman's clutch and run for freedom. Marian's situation would hardly seem humorous were it not for Marian's selfish motives. Marian is completely frightened by the nursing home patients' harsh animal-like gestures and desperation, but her fear renders only an ironic humor and the satisfaction that she gets what she deserves. The situational humor exists even though Marian is subjected to a literally terrifying and unpleasant experience because the dialogical imagination of the language is at work to reconfigure the actuality of the situation into a humorously aesthetic one. For though Marian compares the nursing home and its helpless inhabitants to "a robber cave" and "murders," her fear is humorous rather than horrifying, and lays the foundation for area that the humor redeems.

The youngest of the main characters thus far, Marian still has plenty in common with her fellow leading ladies. Like Phoenix, she sets out on a journey for good, but only for her own gain, and she hardly follows through. Her selfishness makes her like Mrs. Fletcher because she is concerned more about herself than the helpless women she has the power to help. And just as Sister flees her household, Marian breaks free from her situation when she has no longer has a desire to endure the nursing home. Welty conveys Marian's sympathy when Addie begins to whimper pathetically beneath the covers of her hospital bed, but rather than attempting to console her, Marian immediately frees herself from the vulture-like claw of the shut-in. Though

Marian's actions are not redeeming, her character conveys the message of redemption by showing her lack of redeeming qualities.

Marian literally runs from the elderly women she is supposed to be humoring with her cheerful, Campfire Girl presence. The dilemma is rooted in the fact that her motivation is, from the start, self-gratifying. However, despite her terrible experience and her obvious unwillingness to be at the Home, she chooses to endure this terrifying situation for a mere "three points in her score" (113). Again the issue of hubris arises in Welty's main character. All for the sake of three points worth of glory, Marian subjects herself and the objects of her façade of charity to the painful experience of the visit.

As Marian breaks free from the women, indulges herself in her hidden apple, and is even fortunate enough to hail the bus, she shows little concern for the events she just witnessed and seems thoroughly delighted to have escaped them so cleverly. While the ending seems to yield little redemption to the situation, the redemption again is found in the ironic humor of Welty's form. The mythical element creates a distance from actuality which increases the story-like climactic tension of Marian's fright. Welty also incorporates a mysterious element which allows for the reversal of roles among the characters such as the not-so-innocent Red Riding Hood figure of Marian and the less than benevolent grandmotherly characters. These shifts and reversals set the tone for the humor that delivers the tale from its unusual circumstances and render the whole as a revelation of the need for true charity.

These Welty stories reveal the humor's importance in conveying redemptive themes, even in the absence of religious motives. Through the collaboration of myth and humor, the characters invoke a mysterious realm that incorporates a non-physical dimension, in which humor and mystery work to reveal truth and unveil human flaws. In Phoenix's case, the mystery

and play associated with her character invite humor in the midst of her situation. Her age would normally inhibit her playfulness, but her mysterious spritely spirit allows her to complete her journey and explain the mischief behind thievery, which contributes to her eventual redemption in the end. Though Phoenix is not a wholly innocent character, her thievery is redeemed when she selflessly uses her gain for a gift for her grandson. And Mrs. Fletcher's Medusa-like character, which is concerned only with self-interest, breaks under her awareness that she no longer has to try to present herself as superior to her peers. She realizes that much like the petrified man, most people try to put up a façade that only crumbles away, exposing the unavoidable flaws of humanity, which all people share. Her revelation is redeeming when she reveals her intentions of keeping her expected child rather than undergoing an abortion for the sake of maintaining her prided figure.

Welty's mystery continues through Greek myth in *Sister*, but also through the element of language. *Sister's* dramatically tragic point of view exercises a flaw in the truthfulness of her words, which plays humorously upon the background of Cassandra, whose words were never taken for truth either. The humorous characterization of *Sister* eventually highlights, through its omission, the Rondo family's dire need for reconciliation. Likewise with *Marian*, Welty utilizes the absence of the redeeming quality through the humorous situation to express the need for it, which in *Marian's* case is pureness in motive. Humor is redemptive in two ways in the story: first, through allowing *Marian's* circumstance to be seen as deserved rather than terrifying for her; and second, by revealing *Marian's* lack of benevolence, making the girl's visit of "charity" ironically telling of her character flaw. These exemplary stories display Welty's artful combination of myth and humor, and also redemption's reliance on the two. Without the "suspension of disbelief" redeeming the qualities that allow us to see the characters in a

humorous situation, the stories would be merely tragedies rather than comedic commentaries on human nature and the consequences of a lack in morality.

Chapter 3

The Humorous Human Experience: The Redeeming Power of O'Connor's Unapologetic Comedy

“The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million--a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will.”
 –Henry James, Preface to *Portrait of a Lady*

Since the authorial name Flannery O'Connor first graced the published page in 1941, critics and scholars alike continue to analyze the distinct style that separates her from other Southern authors. Though threads of irony, dark humor, satire, and the grotesque appear in other southern short fiction, O'Connor's voice in her stories profoundly echoes throughout the modern period and into postmodern literary conversations. Her propensity to shock through story-telling wins her the attention of critical essayists, and even early critics like John Hawkes mark the dark elements in her writing, claiming that her devilish voice is what makes her stand apart from other writers¹⁴. Though her writing style seems to contradict the very grace, love, and joy her Catholic faith represents, O'Connor's appreciation for humor in the human experience relieves her from the accusation of many critics who claim her tone and subject matter carry a message that refutes the idea of redemption rather than represents the need for it. In her lecture “The Fiction Writer and His Country,” O'Connor quickly defends her use of pain and perversion, claiming that a

¹⁴ In his essay “Flannery O'Connor's Devil,” Hawkes states, “The voice of [O'Connor's] devil speaks with a new and essential shrewdness about what Nathaniel West called ‘the truly monstrous’” (407). Though O'Connor would disagree, Hawkes argues that rather than writing because of her faith and her desire for readers to experience God's grace, her subject matter and voice reveal her impulses to be more immoral than moral. Brad Gooch offers how O'Connor responded to his criticism, quoting her saying, “I like the piece very much,” and offering her elaborated report to Ted Spivey: “Jack Hawkes' view of the devil is not a theological one. His devil is an impeccable literary spirit whom he makes responsible for all good literature. Anything good he thinks must come from the devil. He is a good friend of mine and I have had this out with him many times, to no avail” (345).

story without sin leaves no room for the need for redemption (33). Her use of darkness is warranted directly by this need, but her use of humor is warranted, although indirectly, as well because her element of humor is what reinforces a necessary balance between despair and deliverance. Though her humor comes alongside elements that are grotesque, shocking, and even independently immoral, it is the critical constituent that both tempers her overwhelming themes and allows for the full appreciation of the redeeming factors in her fiction. And while all of her stories use language and character to reflect humor in some dose or form, in her works *The Violent Bear it Away*, “A Stroke of Good Fortune,” and “Temple of the Holy Ghost,” the honesty and wholeness of the humor is key in conveying redemptive themes.

Several aspects of O'Connor's diction specifically reveal how O'Connor's redemptive themes rely on humor in various respects. *The Violent Bear It Away* entails the literal devilish voice Hawkes decries, and also a young man's folly in heeding the voice, yet without so vividly depicting his spiritual struggle and fully conveying the height of his folly, the redeeming factor of young Francis Marion Tarwater's eventual realization and acceptance of who he is would not sufficiently depict the complete, struggle-wrought reward of Tarwater's redemptive realization. In “A Stroke of Good Fortune,” Ruby Hill's worrisome thought process and her efforts to deny what is obvious employs a type of dramatic irony which questions the definition of the woman's idea of “good fortune” and the psychic's. Without both irony and the comedic description of her physical struggle up the stairs, Ruby Hill's recognition of her state would lack the realistic impact as she sits atop the steep staircase, realizing the serious change soon to take place in her life. In the same collection of stories as “A Stroke of Good Fortune,” “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” provides an example of grotesque humor which O'Connor uses to foster the unnamed child's reconciliation of holiness and physicality. Each of these stories testifies to how themes of

redemption in O'Connor's work necessitate her unique use of carnal, comedic elements.

Current authors continue to discuss the issue of O'Connor's humor and her propensity to relay serious messages through characters who are appropriately labeled as less than admirable. Marilynne Robinson expresses her concern in an interview stating that "Flannery O'Connor has been particularly destructive" with the aspect of her literature that associates "religious thought" with frivolous characters, unlike Robinson's pious narrator in *Gilead*, and Robinson argues, because of this tendency in a known Christian's writing, readers fail to associate religion with distinction and reverence. Robinson is correct in inferring that the disreputable voices of central characters¹⁵ in O'Connor's writing are at times "destructive" when they are isolated from the context of humor; however, the humor the characters lend to the story does not destroy but enhances the importance or seriousness of O'Connor's statements about religion. Rather her accentuation—perhaps in some cases over-accentuation—of characters' flaws incites a somber reflection on the root of these flaws, prompts reason to excavate the deeper issues, and instead of destroying the seriousness of religious implications, the complexity and humanness of O'Connor's characters invites serious contemplation. If O'Connor truly believes writing fiction is "a way of looking at the created world and of using the senses so as to make them find as much meaning as possible" (101), the striking flaws that her characters possess and the racy situations in which they are involved cause reactions that aid in uncovering profound truths. Brad Gooch believes that were it not for O'Connor's "backwards" characters, her writings would not have called serious attention to religious and moral issues (9). While the characters themselves may not be respectable, the complex content and form of her stories is telling of the respect the author holds for religious thinking, and her artful presentation of austere problems transforms

¹⁵ Any recollection of a Joy/Hulga or Ruby Turpin provides an example of this truth.

transcendent values into readable, enjoyable, and convicting literature, and though O'Connor's humor is harsh in many instances, the comedic incongruities of her characters and their unordinary situations are required in order to communicate clearly and justly the redemptive themes of her fiction.

O'Connor's story, "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead," explicitly possesses the formula of comical characters and "religious thought" that is the cause of criticisms like Robinson's. First published as a short story before it became the opening chapter of *The Violent Bear It Away*, O'Connor creates a character, Francis Marion Tarwater, that Brad Gooch calls "slapstick" and whom he also describes as having "the depth of what Henry James called 'felt life'" (226). Henry James' term "felt life" appears in his preface to *Portrait of a Lady* as he reckons the often-contradicting ideas of morality and fictional subject matter. His insight on these two items, along with Gooch's association of the term describing Tarwater, sheds interesting perspective on O'Connor's controversial fashion of defining her characters:

There is, I think, no more nutritive or suggestive truth in this connexion than that of the perfect dependence of the "moral" sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it. The question comes back thus, obviously, to the kind and the degree of the artist's prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs. The quality and capacity of that soil, its ability to "grow" with due freshness and straightness any vision of life, represents, strongly or weakly, the projected morality. That element is but another name for the more or less close connexion of the subject with some mark made on the intelligence, with some sincere experience. (45)

Critics often question O'Connor's degree in taste or reverence (or both) in conveying her moral

sense utilizing grotesque, comedic, or even jocular characters, but according to James's theory, the morality of O'Connor's subject does not lie within the façade of the subject itself, but within her own experience and the nourishing "soil" from which her work grows.

In *Mystery and Manners*, she explicitly makes clear that her works are rooted in a richly Catholic and comedic soil; her nonfiction pieces "Catholic Novelists" and "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South" reflect her associations with her faith in the titles alone. Gooch records that her vigorous note taking in her copy of Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, which features Thomas Aquinas' philosophy, reveals her awareness about her faith and her fiction, especially her special annotations next to the phrase, "Do not make the absurd attempt to sever in yourself the artist and the Christian" (qtd. in *Flannery* 156). Just as O'Connor makes the religious elements that enrich her authorial "soil" crystal clear, she also provides evidence for the straightforward humor that livens her works when defending herself to Hawkes: "The basis of the way I see is comic regardless of what I do with it" (*Habit of Being* 400). O'Connor's propensity for comedy and her desire to be both honest in her fiction and faithful to her religion contribute to her absurd and, as Hawkes would say, devilish characters, but the sustaining morality that is the cause of her fiction is stronger than the immorality of her characters in each story. While critics like Robinson and Hawkes are entitled to opinions of O'Connor's techniques, O'Connor's fiction possesses, as James would term it,

power . . . to range through all of the forms of the individual relation to its subject-matter, all the varieties of outlook on life, of disposition to reflect and project, created by conditions that are never the same from man to man, (or, so far as that goes, from man to woman), but positively to appear more true to its character in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance,

its mould. (45)

And certainly O'Connor's fiction did, and does still continue, to break a certain expected pattern as she allows characters like Tarwater to enter the transcendent, holy quarters of her "house of fiction."

O'Connor's combination of conflicting attributes in her characters, such as Tarwater's humorous folly and serious faith, reflects the reconciliation of the physical and spiritual worlds. Frederick Asals marks O'Connor's ability so artfully to convey images of duality which magnifies the conflict in her fiction. To O'Connor, "the act of writing was a reconciliation of these dualistic qualities¹⁶" (129). O'Connor's discourse of this reconciliation is inevitably humorous, usually because of the irony resulting from her imaginatively contrived dualistic motifs of the spiritual and physical, the sinful and the redemptive. Though some of the humor in her fiction is situational or dramatic, O'Connor most often uses humor in the way Asals describes as "scornful comedy," that possesses a motive which he describes in the terms of Sigmund Freud and Willie Sypher as "destructive" and intending to "smash" or "strip" away "evil and folly" (129). Asals later goes on to claim that "[o]ne of Flannery O'Connor's firmest convictions is that the vital centers of life, both within and beyond the self, are radically unreasonable, and in her fiction the nonrational expresses itself in violence" (135). While this claim is true of many of O'Connor's stories, violence is not the only representation of the nonrational. Because of her ferocious passion¹⁷ to portray the mystery of the human situation in

¹⁶ Asals is referring to O'Connor's language of dichotomy in *Mystery and Manners*, and makes note of the following examples in his book: "*reasonable* and *unreasonable*, *reason* and *imagination*, *conscious* and *unconscious* . . ." (129).

¹⁷ O'Connor reflects her passion in "Catholic Novelists:" "The universe of the Catholic fiction writer is one that is founded on the theological truths of the Faith . . . the Fall, the Redemption, and the Judgment. These are doctrines that the modern secular world does not believe in . . . This

concrete details, those details often unravel into violent or shocking situations—Tarwater’s drowning/baptism of Bishop or the implied rape scene—but the element that is present in some form in all of her stories is humor.

Whether the humor cloaks itself in irony or merely a contextual reference, the comedic aspect of O’Connor’s writing acts as the lens through which the human situation is seen anew. She understands that “the type of mind that can understand good fiction . . . is at all times the kind of mind to have its sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality, and its sense of reality deepened by contact with mystery” (*Mystery and Manners* 79). Most people, save a few who perhaps are most distant from reality, accept that no one is perfect; therefore, reality cannot exist without the aspect of human folly. O’Connor’s vivid depiction of human error, or folly, in her fiction acts as a true reflection of reality, and whether distorted or distinct, mirrors the flaws of those who read her works. O’Connor remarks that for writers, and anyone for that matter, “[t]he first product of self knowledge is humility” (*Mystery and Manners* 35), and the sight of this honest reflection which would bear self knowledge and humility renders a sight not so becoming. This reflection describes a re-visioning of the self, which exemplifies the degrees of redemption that humor in fiction provides. Though she firmly claims that “the meaning of life is centered in Redemption in Christ,” O’Connor’s comedy offers another type of “re-deeming” that may eventually lead to salvation. Seeing the folly in her characters allows for a refreshed glance at the human condition on an individual basis of self-recognition. Sarah Gordon even admits that “all of us who have read O’Connor over the years have laughed to recognize ourselves among certain of her fictional folk, although we may have initially resisted to see ourselves there” (227). This “initial resistance” is inevitable when the harsh reality of human nature is clearly visible in

means frequently that [the Catholic writer] may resort to violent literary means to get his vision across to a hostile audience” (*Mystery and Manners* 185).

one's own reflection. Asals describes this recognition in O'Connor's characters, saying "at the violent climaxes of O'Connor's stories all laughter, but not all irony, drops away. For these glimpses of reality lay bare the pain and terror that lurked beneath the comedy all along" (134). While Asals tends to focus on O'Connor's violence, his point still lends importance to the element of humor. For without humor as the comely looking glass, O'Connor's readers would refrain from seeing the whole, both the humor and the horror of her fiction, and more importantly, they would neglect to see an alternate reflection of themselves. Without that self-knowledge, the awareness of and desire for a greater Redemption is lost.

As a vivid example of one who struggles in his acceptance of self-knowledge, O'Connor's young Tarwater endures the consequences of his folly and rebellion throughout the *The Violent Bear It Away*; however, though enduring the fierce internal struggle between his providential calling and the devilish voice, he eventually comes to full awareness and acceptance of his calling. The very first sentence of the first chapter immediately depicts the depth of young Tarwater's recklessness, stating that he is "too drunk to finish digging the grave" of the man who raised him (331). Tarwater's already rebellious state makes him vulnerable to the prodding voice of the stranger, the "loud and strange and disagreeable" voice that tempts him throughout the story to give up his prophetic calling (337). Tarwater's frustration with digging a ten-foot grave for his great-uncle feeds into folly, and eventually drives him to burn down the entire property, deliberately disobeying against his great-uncle's specific wishes.

Early in the first chapter, O'Connor depicts the ironic portrait of this young drunken "prophet" who converses with the devil and eventually heeds his tempting words. The strife and internal struggle only builds during Tarwater's journey throughout the novel, but eventually leads to his self-awareness and submission to the calling which had festered since he first

experienced the “slow warm rising resentment that his freedom had to be connected with Jesus and that Jesus had to be the Lord” (342). This phrase reveals the selfish thought that sparks his long-wrought struggle to disrobe himself of his predetermined prophetic mantle. Until this point, growing up under the teachings of his great-uncle, young Tarwater understands and even believes that he will accept the Lord’s calling (*O’Connor* 334), but his struggle with folly and pride at the onset of the novel are necessary for O’Connor to fully develop her ultimate message and Tarwater’s submission to his call. David Eggenschweiler supports that O’Connor’s implementation of developing Tarwater as a conflicted and comedic character contributes to the wholeness of the redemptive ending:

But in *The Violent Bear it Away*, the climatic revelations have been well prepared, both through the religion of old Tarwater and through the partial insights of young Tarwater from the beginning of the novel. The main progression of the book is the preparation of the boy to accept and, above all, to understand more fully the meaning of the Christian prophet and of salvation. (125-6)

Without O’Connor’s depiction of Tarwater as a troubled and humorous character, his redeeming realization of self would not render complete fruition in the novel’s closing pages.

O’Connor’s utilization of the craft of humor is not only required for Tarwater’s re-assessment of himself at the end of the novel, but also to brace the distance between the spiritual dealings of the story and the physical reality of Tarwater’s situation. Despite the fact that O’Connor lends the devilish voice the power to control Tarwater’s actions and incorporates thematically evil strains throughout the novel, Harold Fickett and Douglas R. Gilbert defend the oft criticized elements by saying, “the role of the devil helped clarify for everybody whose side [O’Connor] was on” (81). His yielding to temptation fosters the extent of Tarwater’s folly

throughout the novel, and eventually contributes to the clear victory in his final revelation: “He shook himself free [of the evil “presence”] fiercely and grabbed the matches from his pocket and tore off another pine bough . . . He glared through the flames and his spirits rose as he saw that his adversary would soon be consumed in a roaring blaze” (475). In the beginning of the novel, after heeding the stranger’s taunts, the foolish drunken act of burning down his homestead is what ignites the young Tarwater’s flee from his calling. Yet O’Connor brings Tarwater’s redemption to full completion at the novel’s end upon his return to Powderhead, when he symbolically burns away the poisonous root that first tempted him to burn his great-uncle’s land to ashes. But without the heavy use of folly in young Tarwater’s attitude and actions throughout the novel, his revelation in the end of the novel that compels him to “move steadily on” despite the “[prophetic lifestyle] that await[s] him” (479) would hardly pierce O’Connor’s vision of his redemption.

Though sharply distinguished from the folly-ridden Tarwater, Ruby Hill is another of O’Connor’s characters who conveys the meaningfulness of humor through a motif almost completely opposite of the one developed in the young prophet; however, similar to Tarwater’s need to accept his prophetic calling, she too must come to realize and accept her pregnancy. In her initial description of Ruby, O’Connor humorously reveals Ruby’s primary flaw of pride through her condescending attitude toward collard greens, her brother’s requested dish which to her was proof that he cannot shake the “[un]civilized” (184) habit of their childhood small-town. Ruby’s “hair stacked in sausage rolls” provides evidence that she is a woman who aims to present herself in a respectable fashion, but the fact her curls have “come loose” (184) reveals her tattered and tired physical appearance which also alludes to the unraveling of her strict will to differentiate herself from her “puckered-up,” “sour” mother (186). O’Connor skillfully portrays

Ruby's pious attitude and uses humorous hints of irony to further make the distinction between Ruby's confident view of herself by juxtaposing Ruby's streaming thoughts of herself with sentences that portray her actions and depict her actual self. Ruby thinks that "[s]he was the only one in her family who had been different, who had any get" (185), but O'Connor cleverly follows this thought by describing her need for her husband to carry her groceries up the steps: "She took a stub of pencil from her pocketbook and wrote on the side of the sack: Bill you bring this upstairs" (185). The immediacy of these two statements is humorous because Ruby's understanding of herself is drastically incorrect. Though she believes she is a self-sufficient, dignified city-woman, so unlike her mother and brother, in actuality she still must rely on her husband because her "get" is no longer active. And to add humorous irony of this woman's flawed self-perception, the portly woman's lack of "get" is due to the same thing that she claims in her mother is "down-right ignorance!" (186). Yet during her trek up the steep staircase, Ruby is choosing to be ignorant of the symptoms that clearly point toward her pregnancy.

As she climbs up the apartment stairwell, each lapse of Ruby's physical inabilities such as shortness of breath or nausea is accompanied by her mental inability to realize the flaws in her own self-perception. Her mind is plagued with condescending thoughts of her family as she recalls how "she had done so much better than her sisters-they had married from around," but then immediately following her thoughts, her physical state emphasizes the unhealthiness of both her mind and body: "'This breathlessness,' she muttered, stopping again. She decided she would have to sit down" (187). Just as she hopes to relax, she sits on six-year-old Hartley Gilfeet's toy, which sends her into an angry monologue of how "stupid" his mother is for not disciplining him and how she would "wear the seat of his good fortune out!" (187). O'Connor's blatant humor in the child's nickname "Mister Good Fortune" directly pokes fun at the plump woman's near

future as foreseen by her psychic Madam Zoleeda: “[a long sickness] will bring you a stroke of good fortune!” (185). The irony of Ruby’s pride and condescension builds with each person she meets along her stairwell, and the further she climbs, the more severe her physical incapability. Likewise, as her physical weakness caused by her pregnancy becomes more difficult for her to avoid, so does her denial become more difficult to maintain.

The comical and ironic elements throughout Ruby’s journey are necessary for her final revelation to be fully made known to her. After her visit with Laverne burdens her with the truth of her pregnancy, she does not relinquish her denial until she utters the words herself, “Good Fortune, Baby” (198). Ruby’s revelation is a beautiful example of O’Connor’s marriage of humor and redemption. Only after her struggle up the steps does Ruby take the time to catch her breath, and before she verbalizes her realization, she “opened her eyes and gazed down in to the dark hole, down to the very bottom where she had started up so long ago” (196); her view of her journey enables her to see truth. The truth of her pregnancy is not made clear to her not until she recalls the aspects of her journey up the stairwell, which is filled with humor and irony. Her run-in with “Mister Good Fortune” shows her dislike of children, yet she will soon be a mother, and her idealistic view of her husband is tested when Laverne places the blame of him, saying he “just slipped up a about four or five months ago” (193). The end of “A Stroke of Good Fortune” congeals the elements of humor, redemption, and revelation, and though Ruby is not relieved about her pregnancy, she is at least freed from her stubborn denial. The coalescence of the elements O’Connor so artfully utilizes is also telling of the reason humor is her method of delivery. In her defense of O’Connor’s use of humor, Denise Askin characterizes comedy as an action that “moves toward freedom, typically liberation” (51), which is especially true in Ruby’s case. The comedy of her traveling up the stairs literally moves her spatially, and through her

ironic encounters, she is ultimately moved to liberation through acceptance of her reality. Ruby's journey up the stairs is laden with humor and irony, and is present, whether Ruby realizes it or not, as she contemplates her journey and recognizes truth.

The young child in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," like Ruby and Tarwater, also comes to a life-altering recognition at the end of the story through the use of humor. O'Connor exploits the girl's own mocking humor, rather than folly or irony, using it to convict the self-aware twelve year old and sharpen her understanding of redemption and forgiveness. A direct example of Thomas' Hobbes's Superiority theory¹⁸, this type of humor works to make a distinction between the girl's haughtiness and the hermaphrodite's holiness. Ralph C. Wood recognizes the theme of the story as a "[d]ivine summons to mortify the sins of the flesh and to vivify the gifts of the spirit" (244), and mockery is indeed the sin most "mortified" in the young girl. However, the girl's own mockery is also necessary for her reception of the "summons"; without her awareness of her flaw, she would not be so entranced by the literal beckoning of the unlikely prophetic warning of a county-fair "freak" exhibit. The girl is aware of her condescending and arrogant nature, and does not try to shy away from her feeling of superiority: "'I'm not as old as you all,' she said, 'but I'm about a million times smarter'" (206). Though the intelligence of her peers may not rise to the same level as hers, her superior jabs uncover the flaw of her pride. But not only does she recognize her own shortcomings, she also understands the superlative nature of her central problem and feels the limitations her imperfection imposes on her: "[S]he knew she would never be a saint. She did not steal or murder but she was born a liar and slothful and

¹⁸ In his work *Human Nature*, Hobbes' original description of the humor based on feelings of superiority stems from one experiencing "a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (n. pag.). Clearly the child experiences the former type in comparing herself with her Susan and Joanne.

sassed her mother and was deliberately ugly to almost anybody. She was eaten up also with the sin of Pride, the worst one” (204). The sin of pride is the root that produces the habit of her constant mockery—she mocks Miss Kerby, the Church of God boys, and even the Baptist pastor within the first two pages. But while her tendency to tease causes her to “double over laughing” (197) at times, her humor is the very tool O’Connor uses to lead the child into a most serious state of reflection in the end.

The story’s title alone highlights the theme of the divine dwelling within the human, and the young girl’s pride in her mocking humor works to reveal to her that even she is unworthy of being the Lord’s temple. She hears the hermaphrodite’s warning, “God made me thisaway and if you laugh he may strike you the same way” (206), which speaks directly to her, condemning her for her belittling habits towards others. During preparation for the Holy Sacrament in the story’s close, she “realize[s] she [is] in the presence of God” and prays: “Hep me not to be so mean . . . Hep me not to give her so much sass. Hep me not to talk like I do” (208). And just as the priest continues the Benediction, she thinks of the faithful freak. Though after the Sacrament, she still demeans Alonzo by thinking his “ears were pointed almost like a pig’s,” she refrains from verbalizing her “ugly thought” (208), and becomes contemplative, gazing at the sun, which looks like “an elevated Host drenched in blood”(209). These images in the final sentence reveal that the message of the revelation is not the fact of her sin, nor is it that she should feel shame for it—of those things she is already aware. She learns a greater lesson through the revelation provided by the most unexpected of messengers or “temples”—the grotesque hermaphrodite. His words reflect to her the existence of hope in the midst of her sin; his words reveal to her the message of redemption. Ironically, the character who is most often the object of others’ mockery, the one whose body hardly seems fit to host a Holy God, is the one who speaks to the young girl and

allows her to see, through the lens of her own habit of making a mockery of others, that she and the hermaphrodite are equals, both Temples of the Holy Ghost, covered in the same blood.

O'Connor's emphasis of redemption, whether referring to the soul's literal purchase through Christ's blood or to the granting of a new vision—or re-judgment—of the self in her characters, is evident in all of her stories. Also present, though in many forms, is her use of humor to carry the theme of redemption in her narratives. Exemplified in the various narratives of Tarwater, Ruby Hill, and the young child in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," O'Connor's humor does epitomize the worst of human nature through her use of folly and its consequences, irony and its hurtful tone, and mockery, with its evidences of hatred. These themes of humor also breed other elements that hardly seem appropriate for conveying a theme as pure and hopeful as redemption. The devilish voice in Tarwater reveals the duality and warfare which so easily ensnares him in the midst of folly; Ruby Hill's denial highlights her selfishness in her resentment towards something she should view as a blessing; and the young girl's revelation is made known to her through a grotesque character. O'Connor is simply exemplifying what James referred to in novelists as the "unique conscious"¹⁹ that contributes to her individual vision of redemption. For these reasons, criticisms like Robinson's are valid in pointing out the reality of O'Connor's often shocking use of humor because Robinson's individual vision of redemption is distinct from O'Connor's. Yet that shocking, sometimes dark humor is the lifeblood that invigorates her literature with the rewarding, honest, and pure truth, truth that she would not successfully convey without incorporating her very own style, what James would call her "individual vision and

¹⁹ James E. Miller, Jr. analyzes James' architectural references to a "house of fiction" and comments on James' understanding of how the novelist "never looked on the frame bare, but in his unique conscious" (595). His analysis gives further insight into the distinct views of novelists which is a helpful in understanding why Robinson and O'Connor seem to have a disconnection in the midst their shared purpose of redemption.

will,” which happens require humor in its most outright, shocking, scandalous, yet utterly convicting forms.

Chapter 4

Finding Mystery in the Mundane: Robinson's Reconciliation of Humor and Religion through Sacrament

“I sometimes feel as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world once and see amazing things it will never know and names for and then has to close its eyes again. I know this is all mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that. There is a human beauty in it.”
 –John Ames, *Gilead*

Marilynne Robinson would agree with the truth in O'Connor and Welty's stories, truths about sin and failure and revelation; however, in her own way of conveying those truths, Robinson strays far from the explicit candor the two southern authors use in their fiction. While Robinson's tone is much more subdued than the startling accents and forthright obscenity in stories like "Why I Live at the P.O." and *The Violent Bear It Away*, she doesn't shy away from using humor in less obtrusive forms. Sarah Churchwell also realizes Robinson's sincere art in employing humor and says of Robinson, "She trusts her readers to be able to think, to appreciate language for its own sake; and while she is morally serious, she is never humourless" (n. pag.). This description is particularly fitting for Robinson because when set against the backdrop of Welty and O'Connor's works which are steeped in humor, Robinson's novels are much more subdued; however, they are certainly far from lacking in their employment of humor.

Robinson's novel *Gilead* testifies that even the most solemn stories reveal the need for humor to deliver their redemptive ends. Voiced in the form of a personal journal, Robinson's novel exhibits this truth in various forms throughout pastor John Ames's dying words to his son. The subject matter alone bears the great weight of death and sorrow, promising fatherlessness and widowhood to his dear child and wife, who late in his life filled the long void of loneliness he endured most of his life. Aside from the immediate circumstances of the pastor and his

family, the framed epistolary narrative also relays secondary stories that are grief-ridden and burdensome, telling of the strenuous hardships throughout generations of hardship in ministry, war, and poverty.

Despite Ames's immersion in the biblical pastoral teaching of two generations of patriarchs, his religious upbringing is more of a testing of his faith than a nurturer of it. His background alone tells of the obstacles that this man has overcome, so many that have sharpened his character and his faith that by the time Ames is writing his journal, he seems like a saintly soul rather than a mortal man. The sincerity and honesty of Ames' language matches the somberness and quietly reflective awe he has towards his physicality and God's presence in his life. His words to his son are charged with deep sorrow and the mystery of life even after his death. Yet even in the midst of the last words of this grave situation from a man so enriched in solemnity, humor emerges as a refreshing and redeeming quality, restoring vitality and assuring hope.

For those who doubt the role of humor in religious conversations, Robinson's novel provides a sound example of the marriage of the two subjects in her novel. In his *Testaments Betrayed*, Milan Kundera affirms that "religion and humor are incompatible" (9), and continues his argument providing definitive grounds for the clash between the phenomena of humor and its associations with faith: "Humor: the divine flash that reveals the world in its moral ambiguity and man in his profound incompetence to judge others" (32). In his first definition, Kundera assumes that the assistance humor provides in revealing to the world its lack of moral standards also thwarts the power of the divine to heal it. Yet this revelation is only helpful in highlighting the truth of man's desperate need for something to reconcile the chaos of the world with the orderly cosmos of the natural universe. Humor, introduces a need, and religion fulfills it. This

ambiguity contributes to what Kundera allots to man as an incompetent judge of fellow mankind, which is absolutely true, but the fact does not prove the incompatibility of humor and religion; it actually does quite the opposite. We see how this seemingly paradoxical pair of religion and humor works in regards to judgment in the life of John Ames. The ironic humor, somber as it is, heightens when Ames, who has begrudged his namesake for the greater part of Jack's life, eventually sees that his judgment is "incompetent" because he realizes that Jack is truly repentant when he receives Ames's blessing. In recognition of man's own incompetence, God's judgment is elevated and man's is made low through this humorous, in the ironic sense, literary element.

In his second definition of humor in his effort to disjoin humor from religion, Kundera makes the mistake in equating certainty with both faith and actuality. He makes a play on words to highlight the idea of hopelessness: "humor: the intoxicating relativity of human things; the strange pleasure that comes of the certainty that there is no certainty" (32). Kundera means this to detract from the hopefulness of religious faith, but his statement yields fruitful truth about religion, and more specifically Christianity, and humor's helpfulness in association with religion's "compelling, mysterious power" which asserts its ability to render a "strange pleasure" about the mystery in truth. And biblically speaking, faith, and religion itself, is a mystery: "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1), not the actual thing hoped for or seen. So Kundera is right, but not in the manner he aims to be. If religion were stripped of its mystery, it would also be stripped of its divinity. So when humor reminds man of the mysteries and uncertainties of the world, it also reminds him of the hope in those mysteries, the hope of humans not being the all-knowing powers of the universe *because* their judgment is impaired and their standards are relative. Rather than humor exposing the hopelessness of mankind as fallible authority, it exposes the hope of man as fallible nonauthority

who looks to a higher power for judgment.

Transition Humor creates a delightful uncertainty in *Gilead* through Ames's reflection on himself in relation to those around him. Ames ponders the phenomena of laughter and its mystifying effect on two un-churched men conversing outside of a garage:

They were passing remarks back and forth the way they do and laughing that wicked way they have. And it seemed beautiful to me. It is an amazing thing to watch people laugh, the way it sort of takes them over. Sometimes they really do struggle with it. I see that in church often enough. So I wonder what it is, and where it comes from, and I wonder what it expends out of your system, so that you have to do it till you're done, like crying in a way I suppose, expect that laughter is much more easily spent. (4)

In this instance that Ames recalls to his son, Robinson shows how the element of humor does produce uncertainty about man and the mysteries that link both the soul and the psyche. And in contemplating this humorous effect of laughter, even in the midst of the uncertainty of it, Ames delights in it—finds the act aesthetically pleasing. So the humor of the two men produces uncertainty, and that uncertainty renders a sort of delight or pleasure. But where Kundera aims to falsify the aspect of religion in that uncertainty, Robinson validates the divine by accenting the fascinating facets of humanity and all its wonder. So rather than hopelessness in uncertainty, humor yields hope as Ames's words speak of the splendor in the mystery rather than sadness in the unknown.

The notion of divorcing humor and religion only proves to diminish the beauty of combining the spiritual with the physical. Despite Kundera's argument, humor actually functions to marry the two elements of the physical and spiritual rather than divorce them. And further

derailing his attempt of whittling humor down to a definitive set of terms, G. K. Chesterton even poses that “humor not only refuses to be defined, but in a sense boasts of being indefinable; and it would commonly be regarded as a deficiency in humor to search for a definition of humor” (22). (Perhaps this statement provides ample insight into Kundera’s “deficiency” of adequately defining the term and reconciling it with religion.) Robinson’s use of humor in *Gilead* follows along the lines of Chesterton’s philosophy, only accentuating the mystery associated between the known world and its mystery, and further contributing to the re-viewing and re-analyzing of the wonders of life through the eyes of old Ames.

Robinson’s eloquence as she reconciles humor and religion in as somber a novel as *Gilead* marks a strong shift from the harshness of grotesque elements and farcical characters of Welty and O’Connor, yet the role of humor in the work of redeeming—or re-judging—still unites the diverse authors through their common use of humor. A far cry from the reckless Tarwater or the illogical Sister in “Why I Live at the P.O.,” the wise Ames hardly seems fit as a character who could convey humor. But Robinson does allot Ames with a humorous capacity in certain aspects of language within his framed narrative. And not only does Robinson lend humor through Ames’s stories, she also incorporates, in other characters, the various humorous elements shared by Welty and O’Connor such as irony and folly, and she also utilizes the element of play which is characteristic of humor through creativity and imagination. So even in the grief-ridden story laden with approaching death, Robinson must use humor to work alongside religion and magnify the mystery as well as redeem the manners. Among Ames’ language, his wife’s irony, young Ames’s play, his grandfather’s extremity, and Jack’s folly, humor weaves the message of redemption and religion in various threads.

The language of the elderly pastor offers relief from his grave situation and also reminds

us of his humanity despite the fact that Robinson portrays him as truly pure-hearted and his motives as saintly. In one excerpt from his journal, Ames relays to his son the recent incident he came across dealing with a joke between his son and his friend Tobias that references what most would consider a curse word. Ames provides a jovial outlook on the situation rather than a judgmental one, and his reaction sheds light on his ability to be lighthearted even in his fat-approaching death. When Tobias's father gravely confronts Ames about the severity of the problem the joke invokes, Ames's reaction shows that he does not believe the joke poses threat to his son's well-being. He appreciates the sense of humor and recognizes he even "said the same thing" as a child and feels he "emerged unscathed" (68). His ability to show favor and grace toward the situation shows that he believes the dose of humor will be beneficial to his son rather than detrimental and can hardly contain his own laughter in observing Tobias's father's overreaction. He eventually gathers himself enough to reply, with just as much sternness, that restricting them in the petty things will only serve to lessen the importance of restricting them in the necessary ones (68). Ames sees the sternness of another father, and though, because of his clerical title, he is expected to be strict with such a situation, he has the ability to smile upon the children's joke.

While others may confuse the letter of the law with the spirit of the law in the realm of religion, or like Kundera, may argue that religion and humor are unable to work together, Ames's humor shows his religion offers grace that is sufficient to cover the minor episode. Ames's taking to humorous antics continues to humanize him and shape the goodness of his character when he also adds in his journal that the other father "ask[s him] twice if [he] was Unitarian" (68). Ames' recognition of the man's over-exaggeration of a valid reaction and also an implied stereotypical view of another denomination is yet another example of how Robinson

reveals the humor in Ames and is evidence of how that humor works in redeeming through such close association with his religious beliefs.

Not only is his humorous language telling of how humor works as an aspect of his religion in redeeming or re-judging his son's action, but humor also helps Ames see his death through a positive lens. He even jokes about something as morbid and depressing as his own funeral sermon: "I've been thinking about my funeral sermon, which I plan to write to save old Boughton the trouble. I can do a pretty good imitation of his style. He'll get a laugh out of that" (122). Ames writes this singular excerpt separately from his other entries on the page, as if he allotted this very solemn act its own space and time in his journal writing to highlight its importance. By Ames inserting this fact, he practices literally coming to terms with his death, and the use of humor works to reconcile him to something even as mysterious and frightening as breaching the passage from the temporal to the eternal. And the appeasement of the reconciliation is not only to be experienced by him; the humor that cheerfully conveys the reality of his passing between the realms will also affect Boughton and his son, providing them with the peace that resonates within the comedy of Ames's passing; for he is not entering death, but getting closer to the marriage supper of the Lamb²⁰.

Robinson carries the image of the Sacrament heavily throughout the novel and especially emphasizes it in Ames's childhood memory of a metaphorical taking of the bread, baptism, and

²⁰ The Bible refers to the marriage supper of the Lamb in the Revelation 19:9: "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (*ESV Study Bible*). According to John Yeatts, Christians believe the end of time will bring a new heaven and a new earth in which Jesus Christ, the Lamb, unites with his Church in a metaphorical marriage. However, Yeatts points out that "[a]lthough the marriage supper seems to be an eschatological banquet after the forces of evil are defeated and Christ's kingdom established (Matt. 8:11), the actual marriage supper of the Lamb is nowhere described. Therefore, it is likely not an event but a symbol of the joyful, intimate, and indissoluble fellowship between Christ and the faithful" (353).

even the simplest of rituals that are symbols of the sacred. This motif is important in the novel because it represents Ames's primary struggle throughout the letters (and throughout his life) of reconciling his spiritual life with his physical life. The motif also provides the need for the element of humor, with what Morreall calls its "compelling, mysterious power," to add pleasure and delight in conveying such other-worldly messages. For example, Ames tells of an instance in his young childhood in which he and several other "pious children . . . baptized a litter of cats" (21-2). But even decades later this humorous situation proves to be redemptive for Ames. He communicates the wonderment sacraments represent and describes this union of the sacred and the substantial in his experience baptizing kittens as a child: "There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that" (25). The versatile characteristic humor has of taking the incongruities of a physical reality, such as performing a holy rite on a litter of barn animals, to yield new perspective as it did for Ames makes humor a necessary literary element in Robinson's novel.

Aside from language, the element of play infuses the sacramental and allows humor to accentuate both the communal and aesthetically pleasing aspects of ritual. Recall that humor is an aesthetic experience, and that Dyrness claims "aesthetics is essential to human flourishing." In order for community to flourish, the basic physical rituals in life must "contribute to something richer and higher; they must give hope, suggest games, even call people to dance" (276-7). The element of play here that Dyrness is describing fits perfectly along with Robinson's theme of reconciling physical rite with spiritual wonder, and she most vividly represents this aesthetic delight in Ames's joy in watching his young son amuse himself in his day-to-day play. Robinson even directly correlates the Ames boy's playing with the sacrament that provides old Ames the opportunity to redeem for his son a similar memory that impacted his life greatly.

Recalling his most vivid memory associated with sacrament, Ames portrays a solemn yet heavenly experience in the churchyard that he counts as one of the most meaningful moments in his life. He nostalgically describes the most unforgettable day in his childhood in which his family joined with the rest of the community in cleaning up the remains of a burned down Baptist church. As he waits with other children under shelter from the rain, his father draws him apart from the crowd to offer him a “piece of biscuit for lunch” (102); but because of the serene surroundings, Ames forever recalls the instant as a moment of sacrament, and the isolated act rests in his memory as if his father actually “broke the bread and put the bit in [his] mouth” (103). Throughout his life he reflects on that bread as a “bitter morsel,” symbolically linking it to hardships he faces throughout his life, and the hope of spiritual healing that will come through the pain. Ames’ aching bouts of loneliness that darkened the greater part of his life on earth probably provided him those other meanings of bitterness he refers to. But he is eventually able to later recreate that moment in offering communion to his own son one Sunday, giving him “some version of that same memory, which has been very dear to [Ames]” (103). Robinson pairs the element of play with this sacramental image later in the novel as the very serious and sacred moment is again recreated through the son’s playfulness. His son makes a joke of pretending to be indecisive in sampling his father’s foods, and has him repeatedly raise a taste of food to his mouth as a game. And in the midst of the “wonderful joke” and the pleasure of his son’s play, Ames recalls “the day [he] gave [his son] communion,” hoping that the memory would reside with his child as much as his childhood memory resided within him.

The aesthetically pleasing moment that occurs in the midst of young Ames’s playfulness does connect his father to something grander than the game itself. In the present experience of his son’s humor through playfulness and joking, Ames’s thoughts are transported to a nostalgic

and vivid moment of his lifetime, and he experiences not only the delight of the temporal moment, but also the sacredness of the moment as an occurrence that transcends time and space, much like the one from his own childhood. This motif of delighting in humor and play works beautifully considering that one of Robinson's themes throughout the novel is Ames's internal struggle of reconciling and contemplating the moments in his past and present that trouble him. In the midst of his complex internalizations regarding his own son growing up without a father, his wife's quickly approaching widowhood, and his namesake's lost soul, Ames is able to resolve the heaviness of his thoughts when he observes simple pleasures that contribute to his aesthetic experience.

Ames takes mental snapshots of everyday playfulness and in their details finds a means to the holy. In one instance in which he sits on his front porch he takes specific delight in all aspects of the scene before him. He notes every detail from the perfect amount of sunlight, to the physical description of his son's "bare feet" and "freckles" (93). The action he observes is humorous—his son is taunting the cat by dangling "a piece of hot dog on a string tied to a stick" (93), but his awareness and vivid description of the playful moment make it more than just a literal action. His pleasure comes through reflecting on the element of play shared between his wife and son. His delight in the moment reveals that there is instilled in it something that exceeds its temporal frivolity and creates an aesthetic pleasure for Ames. The beauty of the language rests in both the form and content of Ames's description. In form, his attention to detail captures his entrancement in a moment that to many may seem mundane, but because of his heightened sense of awareness in painting the scene in words, we know that for Ames, the experience is transcendent of time. And in content, the playfulness of his son, doing something as silly as he is, works by reconciling his humorous reality with the heavenly richness, redeeming Ames's routine

instant into an element of “flourishing life” on earth

In another instance, Ames revels in his son’s play and immediately links the lively spectacle with the sacrament of baptism. Pondering on something so small and taken for granted as a water drop, Ames enters again in to a holy place through the doorway of his son’s humorous play. The sight of his son and Tobias “hopping around in the sprinkler” brings to mind that enriched element that connects Ames’s physical experience to a spiritual one through the aesthetic experience of witnessing playfulness: “I’ve always loved to baptize people, though I have sometimes wished there was more shimmer and splash in the way we go about it. Well, but you two are dancing around in your iridescent little downpour, whooping and stomping as sane people ought to do when they encounter a thing so miraculous as water” (63). The vivacity of young children is constantly present in them, but not until they engage in play does Ames take note of the mystery in the mundane, paying extra attention to the “miraculous water,” and connects it to the miracle of rebirth and regeneration in baptism’s cleansing drops.

Along with playful humor, Robinson utilizes a trace of the humor of folly in her novel, although not in as abrupt a tone as those of Welty and O’Connor, that highlights the fallibility of human works even when the motives are pure. Robinson’s use of folly accentuates the Calvinistic aspect of humor in which the outcome reveals the foolishness of all mankind through others’ failure, and elevates the imperfection despite virtuous motives (Dunne 2). Accenting the eccentric character of Ames’s grandfather, Ames recalls a story his grandfather “used to tell and chuckle over” (58). He relays the slapstick story of a well-meaning abolitionist colony in which its settlers are in the process of building an underground tunnel for slaves, but have underestimated the necessary measures for bracing its walls. When a visitor on horseback stops right above a weak spot, his horse winds up half protruding from the ground of the settlement.

But matters became more hysterical when the townspeople have to “lift a shed . . . and set it down over the horse there in the middle of the road” (60). The most humiliating, and humorous, part about the whole effort is that the one runaway the settlement is hosting decides he ought to find some helper who show more evidence of “good sense”: he tells two men from the town, “I thank y’all kindly, but I best do this on my own” (61). The foolish humor in the short tale sums up the idea that even when man exerts hard work and possesses pure motives, sometimes, he cannot avoid the unrelenting reality of pure failure that stems from his ultimate depravity. The humor in this story reveals a Calvinistic theme that is characteristic of both Robinson and her narrator. Nothing in the story itself is redeeming of the sloppy situation aside from the fact that man must face the fact of his fall, save of course that he can enjoy the laughter that stems from the realization of the reality of human nature.

Folly and play as aspects of humor both point to the mystery of humanity in relation to the human condition, but folly plays a more specific role in working toward the most redeeming aspect of the novel: Jack Boughton’s acceptance of Ames’s benediction. When Ames finally yields to his initial instinct of refraining from telling his son about Jack Boughton’s history, he is honest in portraying the kind of mischievous character Jack was as a boy. Jack’s offenses seem to cover a great range of severity from his setting fire to a mailbox, to stealing a Model T, to covering front steps in molasses (182). The examples are characteristic of a young boy steeped in mischief; but Ames, along with all the mischief, sees “a sadness in the child” whose “transgressions were sly and lonely, and this became truer as he grew up” (182). And in Ames’ language in depicting Jack’s folly, his memories are not lighthearted and nostalgic as they were in his recollection of his grandfather’s abolitionist colony story. Jack’s folly in the purest sense is solely useful in depicting an emptiness, depravity, and need. And while his folly leads to nothing

terribly harmful in his youth, his recklessness as a young man does eventually bear him a short-lived father in the biological sense of the term. Here Jack's folly is not played upon through use of language and context, as O'Connor is able to do with Tarwater. Tarwater's actions are understandable given his hostile childhood living situation, and the extreme antics expected from O'Connor's writing, but Jack's folly is sobering rather than entertaining because it is set against the backdrop of his family and Ames' piety, forgiveness and love. Dunne explains how Jack's folly out sharpens the focus on man's incompleteness, which in turn allows us to see the gaping disparity between what we imagine as whole and what we know as the reality of human nature:

[W]hether or not we found our judgments in religious belief and whether or not we include ourselves in the indictment—human behavior will seem unsatisfactory mostly when it can be contrasted to some theoretically preferable mode of behavior. To the Calvinistic mind, or the Calvinistically influenced mind, this preferable mode of behavior is that of the unfallen, prelapsarian human being.

(11)

Since both Robinson and her narrator are "Calvinistically influenced," this area of humor is indeed working to reveal the truth about man's fall in a human context, but it also works in the context of the novel, emphasizing again the theme of Ames reconciling his struggles before he passes over into another life in which he will experience wholeness, where "the Lord chooses to make nothing of our transgressions" (190). As Ames struggles with accepting and working through Jack's folly, past and present, he is faced also with his own issue of sin in being slow to forgive Jack.

Not until the end of the novel is Ames able to experience symbolic reconciliation with Jack through the benediction, fully forgive the folly that follows Jack throughout his life.

Throughout his life, Ames always felt uneasiness about his namesake's rebellion, partly because he counted himself as a second father to Jack. But Jack's foolishness and folly create within Ames a bitterness that he struggles through even in the last days of his life: "It is not for me to forgive Jack Boughton . . . I don't forgive him. I wouldn't know where to begin" (164). But the folly in Jack's life creates a platform for Ames to redeem his broken past with his namesake by blessing the wayward son: "Nothing could be more beautiful than that, or more expressive of my feelings, certainly, or more sufficient for that matter" (232). The folly in Jack's life culminates in the one moment in which the two men are reconciled through the symbolic benediction. Had Jack's life not been ridden with mischief, rebellion, and folly, the blessing would hardly have the impact that it does on Ames. He even says of the experience, "I'd have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years of intervening for that one moment" (242). Again Robinson joins the elements of religion and humor, using the mystery of Jack's folly, to redeem the issue in Ames's life that burdened him with bitterness for so long. He later envisages himself and Jack in eternity one day, looking back on the moment of that benediction, and Jack exclaiming, "'This is why we have lived this life!'" (243). In the amazing revelation, Ames reconciles the struggles of the physical world and sees how redeeming the sacred moments of the physical life are even in eternity.

Even in the midst of the grave solemnity of Ames's dying words, humor works to redeem, reconcile, and reveal the wonder of the sacred through the material and physical. Despite Kundera's claim, *Gilead* is a well-crafted example of how humor and religion not only *can* work together, but *must* work together. Robinson shows how the fluidity of humor appropriately conveys the aspects of the spiritual world to uncover its cohesion with the material world. Her intertwining of sacramental images both connects the mystery of the spiritual world

to the physical, and also overlaps into playful, humorous images, creating a much more faceted perspective of the connections between the realms. Much like O'Connor's theme of mystery and manners, the humor in the novel works to remind Ames of the wholeness of his self as both a physical and spiritual being, and provides him with peace and he becomes closer to experiencing that wholeness in his eternity. When Ames views symbolic acts of sacrament through the humor's lens, he can clearly see the redeeming vision of his life as a marriage between the sacred and the secular.

While the element of humor works as a literary aesthetic throughout the novel, it also works on a spiritual level. Through Ames's attention to humor, Robinson highlights truth about life and death that become evident to the audience as well as the characters. The meaningfulness of life's details and the gravity of death are central themes throughout the novel. The use of humor covers these oft overlooked or avoided realities life, and allows for them to be "re-judged" or "re-deemed" over the course of the novel. By heightening the sensitivity to these aspects of life, Robinson's novel offers the potential of reclaiming truth in these in which disregard and disillusionment frequently resides. The humor in *Gilead* certainly makes Ames's "flourishing life" something worth seeking after that provides not only aesthetic, but eternal value.

Conclusion

Humoring Toward Heaven

“[C]omedy presents something we can live with, indeed, something in which we can take a certain delight” –John Morreall *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion*

Aside from that fact that Marilynne Robinson writes during a different era than both Welty and O'Connor, the authors still have much in common in both craft and personal experience. Though their works are published decades apart, the works of all three women take place within the context of a jilted, post-Civil War south, and share the common goal of emphasizing the flaws of human nature and the hope of redemption through humor. Similar though they are, the writing styles and specific subject matters of the women cause their use of humor to differ greatly. While O'Connor and Robinson are both adamantly associated with religious parties, Welty is not²¹; however, her works strongly allude to the foundation of a moral standard and her characters' missing the mark of that standard. Welty does utilize the grotesque and her humor, like O'Connor's is situated within the circumstances of the story and the characters' dialogue itself; her knowledge and interest in Greek myth also provide an opportunity for some ironic instances in her writings, highlighting character traits and deepening the meaning of comical inferences. But while Welty may lean toward a mythical rather than Christian motif, O'Connor and Robinson's religion is clear, but each writer utilizes a distinct style. They may share the same ultimate hope in eternity, but their views on conveying that hope are drastically different. O'Connor's writing usually shocks the audience and shouts the gospel while Robinson's somber narrator calmly whispers his nostalgic but honest experiences that reinforce

²¹ In her autobiography, Welty mentions a Methodist upbringing, but never clings to or claims religion as strongly as O'Connor does to Catholicism or as Robinson does to her Protestant Christian faith.

the truths of his faith. Yet the variety of the three authors' differences in humor only accentuates its consistent quality of pointing toward redemption.

These authors each have an acclaimed skill of craft, and bring uniqueness to their art of story, but one thing none of them can stray from is the incorporation of humor into their works. Unarguably, the works of each woman reveal some area of flaw, folly, or failure in the human condition. Though Robinson may disagree with O'Connor's extremity, and Welty may not hold to any one religion, their use of humor points to some need for moral truth. That moral truth in their narratives is made plain through the element of redeeming, or re-judging, and consistently illuminates the pages of their fiction with the aid of humor.

The attributes of the phenomena of humor reveal why exactly it is necessary in unveiling truth, reshaping circumstances, or freeing characters from their previous limitations. The examples of Welty, O'Connor, and Robinson's uses of humor support Morreall's labeling of humor as a "compelling, mysterious power" and something that is both pleasing and "persuasive" (17). These qualities reconcile the use of humor in persuading or winning over a previously flawed perspective and restoring it to a healthy, honest one. The fictional works of Welty, O'Connor, and Robinson exemplify how the aesthetic use of humor is necessary in communicating redeeming messages in honesty and truth. And whether the redeeming message is as simple as explaining the loyalty and humility that exists within a seemingly senile Phoenix Jackson or as grand and eternal as the real-life details that bridge John Ames's sainthood with his human experience, the message would fail to be wholly conveyed without humor.

In its literary form, humor may reveal itself in irony, circumstance, or even mockery, but the common denominator, the single goal that each of these forms works towards and which every literary example in this study points to, is the unveiling of the unattractive, undeniable fact

of imperfection in human nature. As the study of humor continues, scholars must recognize that humor's honesty about the flawed nature of humanity makes it a literary element that not only offers aesthetic qualities to works of literature, but also shines light on the universal issue of fault. The initial aspect of the revelation is devastating: it reveals man's unwholeness, injury, and failure. But the further implications of that fact lead into a proposition most hopeful: since man is unwhole, there must exist some state in which he is made whole. Future studies of humor must take seriously both the aesthetic qualities and the intrinsic elements that make humor not only a psychological or social study, but also a study that penetrates the human soul.

Even when the message is not explicit, humor is capable of producing ultimate delight and joy in both knowing the severity of man's flaws and understanding that redemption for those flaws exists. Welty, O'Connor, and Robinson understand that humor's revelation is likely to spur a restorative measure, presenting the audience with the hope that wholeness is not unattainable. These authors understand the power of humor, and use it for good by honestly portraying the human experience; their works lend credibility and importance to humor, a human sense that many may disregard. Welty, O'Connor, and Robinson utilize humor in literature in a way that affords both goodness and pleasure. Humor is not a mere source of laughter or a tool providing comedic relief. The humor in their stories sustains the redemptive themes, strips humanity down to its flaws and failure, and most importantly offers the restorative hope of wholeness and redemption.

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